

Robert Reed: Graffiti

# Fantasy & Science Fiction

JUNE

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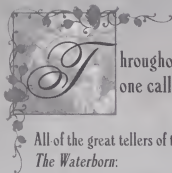
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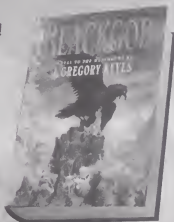
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# EDITORIAL

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GORDON VAN GELDER

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**M**AXWELL Perkins used to maintain that a good book editor is invisible. If you see his or her hand at work in a book, that editor hasn't done the job well.

By contrast, a good magazine editor's presence is tangible in every issue — the stories, the columns, and the whole atmosphere of the magazine reflect the editor's taste and interests.

For the past eight years, I've worked as a book editor for St. Martin's Press. I hope you haven't detected my presence in any of the books I've handled, but I also hope you've read some of them. Many of the writers I've edited are frequent contributors to these pages — Jack Cady, Marc Laidlaw, Kate Wilhelm, and Bradley Denton among them — and I've also edited mysteries and books on popular culture.

But as I say, I've striven to be invisible, so you probably don't

know much about me. For those of you who want to know more about the new *F&SF* editor, here's a once-over lightly bio:

*Born in New York, grew up in New Jersey, moved back to New York shortly after graduating college. Father was a museum curator, mother directed a local art center. Currently live in Manhattan with wife and pet hamster. No relation to the late New Yorker critic Robert Van Gelder nor to great jazz producer Rudy, but magazine and newspaper writers Lawrence, Sadie, and Lindsay (since I know people will ask) are uncle, cousin, and ex-aunt, respectively.*

I must say that writing about myself isn't something I enjoy doing (and I'm sure you'll get to know me soon enough anyway). Indeed, while I've published a couple of short stories, I'm not nearly the writer Kris Rusch is, so one change I'm planning to make already will be fewer editorials. I would rather bring you more stories each month

than submit you to my own ramblings.

Indeed, I'm most comfortable writing when I'm discussing books and stories (in addition to editing books, I worked six years as an editor and occasional reviewer for the *New York Review of Science Fiction*), so I've decided to replace the "Brief Reviews" column with my own readings and recommendations. This way I'll be able to keep you up to date on new releases and mention books the regular columnists might not cover.

Speaking of the regular columnists, you'll see some changes soon. Pat Murphy and Paul Doherty, a colleague of hers at San Francisco's Exploratorium, will be joining Gregory Benford in providing our science columns. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Hand and Douglas E. Winter will be joining Robert Killheffer and Michelle West with regular book review columns, complementing Charles de Lint's monthly "Books to Look For."

This lineup sounds like a great deal of coverage of new books. It is. I think there are a lot of good books seeing publication nowadays, and I'd like readers to know about them. Don't expect us to cover everything, however. Frankly, the science fiction and fantasy genres have grown

so large that nobody — not even a full-time reader with indefatigable eyes — could possibly keep up with it all. My aim is simply to cover as many of the best and most interesting books as possible.

Astute readers will notice that this month Charles de Lint reviews a book that I edited, Rachel Pollack's *Godmother Night*. Nobody planned for this review to appear in my first issue, but the coincidence gives me a good opportunity to discuss my conflicting interest. In addition to editing this magazine, I am retaining my position at St. Martin's Press (though I'm cutting back on my workload — I love my work, but I do want to sleep occasionally). I'll be handling ten to twelve books each year, and while I hope to see those books reviewed favorably and widely, under no circumstances will I pressure this magazine's reviewers to discuss those books, nor will I try to affect their opinions beyond correcting factual errors.

I might discuss other St. Martin's books than my own — the company publishes about 600 books each year — but if ever I do so, I'll make my connection to the book explicit. St. Martin's Press owns TorBooks and has some of the same management, but I myself have

(Continued on p.8)

# U P I H a r p e r



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## **YEAR'S BEST SF 2** Edited by David G. Hartwell

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ISBN: 0-06-105746-0 • \$5.99 U.S./\$7.99 Can. • Mass Market Paperback/June 1997

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*(Continued from p.5)*

never been an employee of Tor Books and I feel no conflict of interests in discussing their books.

I hope that settles that issue.

A lot of people have told me they're anxious to see where I take the magazine. Frankly, I'm as eager as they are to see whither goes *F&SF* — this magazine has been a favorite of mine since I was thirteen, and becoming the editor here is fulfilling a youthful wish. But in terms of the magazine's future, well, I come

on board with no grand aesthetic pronouncements, no master plans for the fate of all fiction. Rather, my goal is to bring you the most entertaining magazine possible each month — the best blend of fiction, the most interesting columns, and a surprise or three to keep you on your toes.

I sort of envision this magazine's appearance each month in your mailbox as being like a visit from an old friend bearing gifts. I hope you'll like the stories I bring. ☞



THE DAY THEY INVENTED PAPYRUS



*The prolific Robert Reed returns with his second cover story of the year, this one a compelling tale of a small city with a dirty secret lying just beneath its surface....*

# Graffiti

*By Robert Reed*

IT WAS A RIVER TOWN known locally for drunks and evil women, mayhem and crimes too sordid to mention in decent company.

But in the 1890s, a grisly and unsolved triple murder made headlines across the country, and simple shame forced its good Christian citizens to act. Originally called Demon's Landing, the town renamed itself Riverview. Corrupt law officers were replaced with a modern, professional police force. The town and county were declared dry. New schools were staffed with young women of unimpeachable character. Zoning laws and civic projects brought a sense of order, while fortuitous fires drove out the notorious families. It was even alleged that the mayor, a determined young pragmatist, hired a wandering mystic to help protect Riverview from the criminal element.

According to some, the mystic was a wild-eyed, tubercular man with a gaudy name painted on his mule-drawn wagon. Yet just a few years later, no one seemed able to recall his name or which direction he had taken as

he left town. Hopefully he was never paid for his questionable work. A terrible crime wave heralded the new century's arrival. A favorite school teacher was molested in the most heinous fashion, the bank was robbed twice in one year, and both a Methodist minister and the beloved mayor were shot and killed by thieves. The only blessing was that the rejuvenated police force, led by a young man named Bethans, managed quick arrests, and under interrogation, every suspect confessed in full. The murderers were hanged with suitable fanfare, while thieves and rapists spent years in the state penitentiary; and for the first time, the river's vulgar souls began to say that if you wanted to have some fun, you'd best have it somewhere other than Riverview.

The next decades were built on small events and modest prosperity. Crime wasn't abolished, but violence seemed to always end with quick arrests and telling punishments. By the late 1960s, the little river town had grown into a tidy city of fifteen thousand, its elderly brick downtown nestled against the wide brown river, handsome older homes hidden on the wooded bluffs, and higher still, where the country opened up and flattened, there were the sketchy beginnings of urban sprawl.

There was both a public and Catholic high school. Macon Lewis played quarterback for the public school's lackluster team. Eddie Cane was his classmate and best friend. He lacked Macon's size or cockiness, but Eddie was the better athlete, one of the top cross country runners in the state, and because of it, the boys were social equals as well as friends.

Macon was six months younger, yet he played the role of older brother, introducing his introverted, somewhat artistic sibling to the larger world. Eddie's first date and first sex were both arranged by Macon. Eddie got drunk for the first time with Budweiser bought by his best friend. As a team, they had explored the wooded bluffs, pulled monster catfish from the churning river, and when Macon heard a crazy rumor about the old storm sewer beneath Main Street, he suggested that they sneak down there and have a look.

"A look at what?" Eddie wondered aloud.

"You like to paint," Macon reminded him. "Well, there's some really strange paintings in that sewer. If what I heard is true, I mean."

They met after dark, armed with their fathers' best flashlights, Macon shouldering a heavy knapsack that rattled as they slipped into a deep,

weed-choked gully. The sewer began where the gully dove into an oversized concrete tube, the tube's mouth blocked by thick steel bars aligned in a crosshatching pattern. There was a small door secured by heavy padlocks, and for no conscious reason, Eddie felt relief when he thought they could go no farther. It was just a sewer, of course. In eighteen years, he had never wondered what was beyond the barricade. But he smiled in the darkness, smiled until Macon said, "Over here. We can get inside here."

Freezes and floods had worn away a portion of the concrete wall. With the help of a crowbar, chisel and ball-peen hammer, they enlarged nature's work. Then Eddie, smaller by plenty, slipped easily into the sewer, and with a lot of grunting and twisting and breathless little curses, Macon joined him, slapping his buddy on the back, then whispering, "Follow me," with a wink that went unseen.

A trickle of water, antifreeze, and discarded oil led the way, spilling down a long slope before turning beneath Main Street, slowing and spreading until it was little more than a sheen of moisture and reflective slime. Modern concrete gave way to enduring red brick. The sewer had been built in the 1890s, arching walls frosted with an excess of mortar, and the mortar was decorated with colorful, even gaudy paintings. Holding a big Coleman flashlight in both hands, Eddie focused the beam on the nearest work. In clinical detail, it showed a man and woman making love. Except they weren't making love, he realized. The woman was struggling, and the man, taking her from behind, held a knife flush against her long and pale screaming throat.

"This is real," Macon reported. "Everything you see here happened as it's shown."

Other paintings portrayed other violent crimes. A man dressed in an old-fashioned suit was being shot in the face, pointblank. A second man was being gutted with a long blade. A third was being battered from behind with a baseball bat. And in each case, the painting looked astonishingly new, and the murderous person was shown in photographic quality.

It was a kind of gallery, Eddie realized. Utterly unexpected, and inexplicable. Yet Macon had a ready explanation. "The way I hear it, our town once made a pact with the Devil, or someone just as good." He illuminated his own face, proud of his knowing grin. "If there's violent

crime anywhere in Riverview, it appears here. As it happens. By magic."

"How do you know?"

A mischievous wink, a brighter smile. "Pete Bethans told me." Pete was the police chief's son and a third-string running back. "A slow kid," was Macon's harsh assessment. "You've been around him. Slow in a lot of ways, but that's why I believed him. He couldn't invent a crazy story if his life depended on it."

Eddie nodded, slack-jawed, wandering downstream.

"Chief Bethans comes here once a day, just to check the paintings. Because if there's anything new, that means that it just happened." A pause. "Pete's dad and granddad were both Chiefs, and Mayor Smith has been mayor for thirty years. It's supposed to be their secret."

A face sprang out of the gloom. A boy's face. Distorted, in agony. Eddie hesitated, then in horror realized that they knew him. His family had moved into Riverview a few years ago, in mid-semester. The boy had sat beside Eddie in homeroom. For about two weeks, he was the quiet newcomer. Polite, but distant. Then came rumors of an unspeakable scandal, and for no clear reason, his father drove the family sedan into their garage and shut the door and let the engine run. Which was too good of a death, Eddie realized. Shining the beam past the suffering face, he saw the father, saw what he had done, and for all the horrible things that Eddie might have imagined, this was worse. A thousand times worse. How could the boy, or anyone inflicted with this kind of hell, not just die of shame?

For a long while, neither boy made the tiniest sound.

Then Macon forced himself to give a nervous little laugh.

Feeling tired and hot, Eddie started upstream again, his entire body aching as he sobbed quietly.

For his benefit, or maybe for both of theirs, Macon said, "That sort of crap happens. Every day, all around the world — "

"Not in Riverview."

"Exactly." Macon gestured at the first painting, the one of a woman being raped. "These things help the police keep law and order. And what's wrong with that?"

"You said we made a pact with the Devil," Eddie replied.

"I was teasing," Macon promised. "Nobody knows what's responsible for them."

Overhead was the rumble of a big truck rolling down Main Street. They heard it through a nearby sewer grate.

"Besides," said the quarterback, "these are just pictures."

What did *that* mean?

"If you can't stand looking at them, don't." Macon was talking to himself as much as to Eddie, his voice suddenly large, filling the sewer from end to end. "If they bother you too much, just shut your eyes!"

**F**ROM THE TIME he was eight, art teachers had praised Eddie for his drawings, particularly for his attention to proportions and his precise sense of detail. His doodles were well-received in study hall, and some of his work had ended up in the last two yearbooks. People with no special gift liked to tell him, without a trace of mockery, that he had a great career as an artist waiting for him. Yet Eddie had enough appreciation for art and its demands to know that he had no future, save in some narrow commercial venue. Talent was a fire, and he couldn't feel any fire, and the truth told, he wasn't even a little sorry for its absence.

Macon didn't understand about fire and talent. Eddie was an artist, and when Macon had his own inspiration, he worked hard to solicit Eddie's cooperation. It was several weeks after their secret visit to the sewer. In two more days, their school would play crosstown rival Pius. There was no bigger game every year. As always, the smaller Catholic school had recruited from across the county, and they were a virtual lock for the state's Class B championship. "They creamed us by five touchdowns last year," Macon complained. "And Haskins is even better this year. Throwing, running. He could play us without his front line, and he'd still beat us shitless."

Haskins was the enemy quarterback. Big college scouts had been coming through Riverview for two years now, the All-State senior being the prize and Notre Dame rumored to be in the lead.

Knowing his friend's crafty mind, Eddie asked, "What are you thinking? You've got a stupid idea, don't you?"

"Not stupid. Brilliant!" Macon felt deservedly proud, laughing and drumming on his belly with a happy rhythm. "Who's the heart of the Pius defense?"

A junior linebacker. A farm boy named Lystrom.

"Exactly. And suppose we make certain neither Haskins or Lystrom play Friday night. Just suppose."

"We'll lose anyway," Eddie replied.

"Maybe so," Macon allowed. "But not by five touchdowns, and I won't get the shit beat out of me."

"So what's this idea of yours?"

"First," said his best friend, "promise that you'll help me. Tonight. A couple hours' work, tops. What do you say?"

Eddie never agreed to help, but he never quite wrestled his way out of the onerous duty, either. "I'm not a good enough painter," he kept telling Macon, right down to the moment when they reached the sewer's entrance. Arms aching from carrying paint and brushes, he said, "It'll take too long, and we don't have enough light. And besides, someone's sure to find us —"

"The only ones who'd want to find us are home asleep," Macon snarled. "Put that crap down and help me. We've got bigger problems here."

Someone had blocked the way in, patching the concrete and plugging the gap between the bars with heavy hog-wire. But Macon had a thorough nature, and he'd come prepared. Bolt cutters removed the wire, and the new concrete hadn't set properly, flaking off without much fuss, leaving enough space for both of them to squeeze inside.

The graffiti hadn't changed in their absence. Eddie wondered if Chief Bethans bothered coming every day, or if once a week was enough. What if their clever work went unnoticed? He asked that reasonable question several times, and he was rebuffed, Macon finally turning to him, saying, "Paint. Now. And tell me where to point these damned lights."

Mimicking the colorful, almost photographic style wasn't simple. Making the faces lifelike and plainly recognizable seemed practically impossible. Eddie had brought a Pius yearbook and several newspaper photos, and he worked with deliberation, moving too slowly for Macon's comfort, finishing the faces by midnight. Then came portraying the crime itself. They'd decided on a rape, its victim blessed with an anonymous face. The police would be forced to hold the football stars for days, searching for a nonexistent woman. But there is no such thing as a truly

anonymous face, and whenever Eddie thought he saw something familiar about the nose or jawline or eyes, he would have to retreat and make changes. Nobody was to be genuinely hurt tonight. He wouldn't be doing this if he thought there was the slenderest chance of harm.

Occasionally, Macon would say, "Hurry."

Besides the patient trickling of dirty water, the ancient brick sewer remained silent. Utterly indifferent.

Eventually, Eddie couldn't hear his friend's calls for speed. Fatigue and worry vanished. He found himself going back again, adding details that felt right. The victim was naked, on her hands and knees, twisted into a painful, unnatural position, her naked attackers buried in both ends; and he worked hard presenting the dangling breasts and the curl of varicose veins, then the fearful eyes, blue and huge, and her sweaty and matted short brown hair.

Hours passed in a moment. Nearly finished, Eddie suddenly pulled back his brush, realizing this was what the artist's fire felt like. It was past four A.M. One flashlight had died, and the big Coleman's beam was weak, trembling in Macon's tired hands. But Eddie had never felt more alert, smiling now, telling his friend, "All that's left are Lystrom's arms, then we're finished."

Again, with force, Macon told him, "Hurry."

But before Eddie could moisten his brush, the Coleman failed. Absolute blackness descended. Macon cursed, smacking the battery pack with a flattened, angry hand, causing a flickering and very weak beam to play across the painted mortar, showing the boys what had happened.

Lystrom had his arms.

Painted in an instant, they were bare and pale and very thick. One hand gripped the victim's short hair, jerking hard. But the other hand and arm was what startled. The arm was swinging, that sense of motion captured perfectly, a linebacker's fist being driven hard into the victim's small, helpless face.

An inch short of panic, the boys gathered up their tools and paints, then fled, saying nothing and never looking back.

They reached home before five o'clock, trading mystified looks before climbing through their respective bedroom windows.

Both lay in bed for the next two hours, sleepless, trying hard to make sense of what they'd seen. Nothing had really happened, they prayed.

Paint on bricks could do nothing, and the woman was nobody, and it was all in fun, and without doubt, they encouraged themselves, any true blame belonged squarely on the other guy's shoulders.

Their alarms went off just before seven. Exhausted beneath the covers, they listened to their radios, to the same limpid ballad, music fading into silence, then a shaken voice interrupting the false tranquility.

The bulletin was abrupt, and horrible, and very nearly expected.

A young nun — Sister Mayhew, a Spanish teacher at Pius — had been raped and savagely beaten, and the incredible crime happened inside the convent, and en route to the hospital, she had died of her injuries.

Her killers were being sought, the disc jockey promised.

And the boys closed their eyes, and wept, knowing exactly who was responsible and feeling ashamed for everything, particularly the sense of their own perfect invulnerability.

**B**Y ANY MEASURE, it was a bizarre, inexplicable crime.

Haskins and Lystrom lived at opposite ends of the county, in every physical and social sense of the word, and despite playing for the same team, they were anything but friends — a competitive rivalry having blossomed into a full-scale feud. It was startling to think of them spending time together, in any capacity. Neither had a criminal record. And while the linebacker had a genuine temper — the kind that might kill out of miscalculation — his alleged partner was unaffectionately called Saint Haskins.

But their guilt was undeniable. Two nuns had clearly seen them escape over the convent wall. A third witness saw Lystrom's pickup roll through a spotlight on Main Street just as Sister Mayhew was found in her room, in bed, her sweet face crushed, a plaintive voice naming her assailants before God mercifully took her. And as it happened, a sheriff's deputy pulled Lystrom over before he made it halfway home, intending to give him a warning for driving too fast. But there was fresh blood on the boy's T-shirt, and he acted confused, perhaps drunken. As a precaution, the deputy cuffed him and stuffed him into the cruiser's back seat. Then came word that the Pius stars were wanted for questioning, that they should be approached with the utmost caution; and the deputy, thinking



it had to be a mistake, asked his prisoner, "What kind of prank did you pull?"

Lystrom unleashed a low wild moan, then gave a full confession, relating events with a miserable and accurate and thoroughly astonished voice.

Minutes later, Haskins was found, naked and shivering, kneeling between his mother's washer and dryer, praying so hard that he barely noticed the uniformed officers or their handcuffs.

The football game was delayed. There was talk about canceling it altogether, but both teams had an open date in two weeks, and there was hope that the noble aspects of the sport would help the community heal.

Every Catholic school closed for the funeral.

On the same day, the prisoners were taken to the old courthouse to be arraigned on murder and rape charges. Both Eddie and Macon slipped out of class, joining the angry crowd on the courthouse grounds. They hadn't spoken since the sewer. Crossing paths, Macon stepped up and told his friend, "It's your fault. If you hadn't used a real face — "

"I didn't know the woman," Eddie interrupted.

"You must have," Macon insisted. "In your subconscious, at least."

And despite saying, "No, I didn't," Eddie found some secret part of himself believing that it should be him shuffling along in chains, gazing at the ground, listening to a thousand angry people telling him that he should be roasted alive, or worse.

Daneburg was next week's opponent. Macon was in no shape to play. He threw four passes before the coach benched him, three of them intercepted and the last one launched over the goal posts. Watching from the stands, Eddie saw the quarterback sitting alone, shoulders sloping, his helmet between his feet and his eyes gazing out at nothing. Eddie felt genuine pity for his friend. But the feeling passed. By next Monday the despair and self-doubt had vanished. Once again, Macon was strutting between classes, laughing and grinning. Except he'd been through an incredible episode, and he had survived, and the experience showed in the lean hard face and particularly in the eyes, bright and steady, incapable of anything resembling hesitation or compromise or fear.

The game against Pius began before a quiet, subdued crowd. Macon remained on the sidelines, watching the larger, swifter opponents maul

his teammates. His replacement was knocked senseless by Lystrom's understudy. It took two men and a stretcher to carry him off the field. Then the coach, having no other choice, sent Macon into the war.

People in and around Riverview would talk about the game for years, with a mixture of awe and earnest gratitude.

Before the game was finished, the lead had changed nine times. Macon threw five touchdown passes and ran for two more, including the last-second game winner. He was carried from the field on his linemen's shoulders, and the image of him — the hero of a great contest, nothing on the line but pride and poise — would linger in the public consciousness for decades.

There was a quick trial in January, the defendants found guilty of second-degree murder, both sentenced to life terms.

Eddie spoke to his boyhood friend just once before graduation.

It was May. Macon was having a beer on the school's front stoop — the privilege of fame — and on a whim, Eddie approached, asking him, "How can you live with yourself?"

The piercing eyes regarded him for an instant, then looked away. A slow, self-important voice remarked, "It took me a long time to see it. You've always been a cowardly little fuck."

What did he mean?

"Eddie," he said, "it happened. It's done, and it'll stay that way."

"I know," the boy whispered.

"I don't think so." Macon shook his head, speaking with an easy scorn. "Has it occurred to you that we aren't responsible? Not for any of it, I mean. Think. There's some bizarre force that paints crimes as they happen. Who knows how? But maybe the force appreciates using someone else's hands and paint, and we're not guilty of anything. Ever think in those terms?"

Never, no.

"You should," was Macon's final advice. "A lot of things come clear and easy, so long as you think about them in the right way."

A California college gave Eddie the chance to run for a degree. He left Riverview in the summer, returning just twice in the next thirty years — for Christmas, then his father's funeral that next spring. Mom

moved back East to live with her old-maid sisters. He would think about his hometown, sometimes for hours on end, yet almost never spoke about it, even to his girlfriend. He married her after his junior year. He graduated in the bottom third of his class, then drifted from career to career, gradually eroding his wife's patience and good humor. They parted peacefully enough, with few tears. A second, less patient wife arrived some years later, and she never appreciated his long silences or far-off gazes. Not long after her departure, Eddie was sitting in his apartment, skimming through channels with the volume muted...and suddenly he saw a familiar scene, the river and far-off bluffs exactly as he remembered them, but the nearer buildings mostly new and too tall — baby skyscrapers standing rooted on the narrow floodplain.

Riverview was growing. The reporter told him so, and the video confirmed her assessment. Good schools and a low crime rate were just two reasons why corporations liked that obscure Midwestern town, and the latest convert was easily the most impressive. A Fortune 500 computer firm was relocating to Riverview. A modern campus would grow on the nearby bluffs, a billion dollars and thousands of employees pouring into local coffers. Explaining his decision, the corporation's CEO and major stockholder used a passive voice, every word rehearsed, his praise for Riverview relentless, and unconvincing.

But what stunned Eddie, what caused him to shout at the television, was a glimpse of the third-term mayor as he shook hands with the CEO: The mayor smiling with utter joy while the other man grimaced, eyes huge and haunted, looking like a man trapped. Utterly and forever trapped.

A stranger appeared in Riverview that next spring. He registered at the new Holiday Inn, paid for his room with cash, and after two days of sightseeing, fishing, and antique shopping in the old downtown, he was seen walking beside a high chain-link fence, staring into the forbidden gully.

Security cameras monitored his progress. Videotape caught him studying the sewer's mouth, examining the newly installed titanium bars and razor wire, the various cameras and both of the electrified fences. A cruiser arrived in short order. The man was questioned at length. He

claimed to be a field biologist looking for rare plants, and he apologized profusely for any inconvenience that he might have caused. Because he had made no attempt to break into the sewer, he was released. Neither the officer or his direct superiors had any reason to doubt the story. If they punished everyone who was curious, the public would surely begin to wonder what made that sewer so special.

Subsequent checks determined that the intruder had lied. He was not a biologist, and he had registered under a false name.

As a matter of policy, the intruder's file was sent upstairs to the new Chief. Something in the accompanying photographs bothered him, although he couldn't decide what was wrong. His daily meeting with the mayor was at four; he brought the file with him, laid it down on the mayor's desk, then felt like an utter fool when Macon said, "Don't you recognize him? Even bald, I'd know him. Shit, it's got to be Eddie Cane!"

The one-time running back — still a big slow man, but obedient and cautious — replied with a reflexive doubt, "It can't be. Your friend lives in California. We pay that investigator to keep an eye on him —"

"Not much of an eye," Macon replied. Then he took a careful, composing breath before saying, "Find him. Now."

"And?"

The look said it all. *Don't let him out of town.*

Yet despite an intrusive and efficient police department, Eddie wasn't found. He didn't return to his motel room, nor was he seen again around town. As a precaution, new cameras and a third, hidden electric barrier were installed by trusted specialists, and through certain backwater avenues, a contract was put out on Eddie's life. The Chief, undistracted by imagination, felt there was nothing to worry about. But the mayor, made of more paranoid stuff, barely slept for the next few weeks, and when the call came at two on a Monday morning, he still hadn't shut his eyes.

"Your friend's back," said the Chief, his voice soft, timorous.

"Where is he?"

A long pause.

"Where the fuck is Eddie?"

"He's already inside," the Chief confessed. "The infrared sensors spotted him...we don't know how he got in...!" A pause, then he whispered, "Macon?" For the first time in a century, a Bethans found himself honestly terrified of the future.

"He's your good friend," said the Chief. "What do you think he's doing down there?"

IT HAD BEEN YEARS since Eddie painted, and he worked with a quick, unpracticed deliberation. He was dressed in a bulky rubber suit. In one hand was a brush, the other held a long flashlight with a brilliant halogen beam. Water was running through the old sewer, ankle-deep after hard spring rains. He didn't hear footfalls until the intruders were close, and he never stopped working, not pressing the pace but making sure that he had finished painting the leg before a familiar voice told him, "Step away. Back from the wall, now."

A second light came on, then others.

There were more men than he had anticipated. Trusted officers led the way, as if blocking for their mayor and chief of police. Everyone wore old clothes and bulky rubber waders.

"Eddie," said Macon. Not once, but several times.

"How did you get in here?" the Chief demanded.

Eddie spoke matter-of-factly. "When I was here last month, I noticed some kind of pumping system down by the river. Very new, very expensive. It occurred to me that you wouldn't want any harm to come to this place, and you certainly don't want to be kept out of here by floods. I checked with the engineering firm you used. I pretended to have the same need, and without knowing the importance of it, they told me that after the pumps stop, there's a two minute window where the valves are left open. Not a lot of room in there, but I haven't picked up too much weight. Have I, Macon?"

Macon had the same handsome face, the same piercing eyes, but his charm seemed a little worn, used too often and finally, after all these years, hard to conjure on command.

Stepping toward Eddie, he half-smiled and said with quiet force, "We've been watching you. Even before I won the election, I had people keeping tabs on you."

"I never guessed it," he admitted.

"If you hadn't come back, we would have left you alone."

"No doubt."

"Put down the paint brush, Eddie."

The words, equally serious and preposterous, seemed funny. He smiled, dropping the brush into the water, then threw his beam across the sewer. "A nice little business you've got here, Mayor." On the old white mortar was the corporate giant he had seen on television. He was using a fire ax to chop a man's head from his shoulders. "You invited that billionaire to come here, didn't you? You wine'd him and dine'd him, trying to sell Riverview, and when he said, 'No, thanks,' this is what happened to him. A sudden, inexplicable murder. And afterwards, favors won."

No one spoke.

"How much business comes here because of blackmail?"

Silence.

Eddie shone his light in Macon's face, without warning. "Who does your painting, you son-of-a-bitch?"

One of the nearest policemen took credit with a cocky nod.

Eddie continued. "The poor murderer wouldn't suspect, would he? How can he know that you manipulated him? Like a puppet. Which is probably what you do to your enemies too, I'm guessing."

The walls were covered with horrors, so many that they had to overlap, new blood laid over the old.

Macon came closer, glancing at Eddie's work with an insult at the ready. "You don't paint very well anymore."

"I suppose not," he agreed.

"Legs and bodies, but I don't see faces."

"Faces could wait, I thought."

His lack of urgency bothered Macon. "Without faces, the magic doesn't work. This is just ordinary ugly graffiti."

His head cocked to one side, the artist remained silent.

"Well," Macon said with finality, "you shouldn't have come back. Not once, and certainly not twice."

Eddie glanced at his watch, then with a gray and very reasonable tone, he asked, "What if painting these walls wasn't my reason for being here?"

Macon had begun to turn away, but he hesitated now.

With an angry, impatient voice, the Chief asked, "What do you mean?"

"Maybe all I wanted was to lure as many of you as possible down here." A grimace more than a smile now. "Which I've done, it seems."

No one seemed certain how to respond.

"Who's been on parole for a year and a half now?" A slow shake of the head. "Lystrom."

Nobody dared speak, or move.

"Haskins would have been out too, but he hung himself fifteen years ago. In his cell, alone. I didn't know it myself until a couple weeks ago, frankly." A long sigh, then Eddie confessed, "For all the guilt I've carried around all these years, I really didn't do much of a job keeping up with the news."

"What about Lystrom?" whispered Macon.

"Hasn't changed much. Still big, if anything even stronger — prison does that to men — and he still has that linebacker's temper. You should have seen his face when I told him the whole story. He didn't quite believe me, not at first, but just the idea of it made him furious."

There came a rumble, low and steady. Everyone heard it over the murmur of flowing water, and together, in the same instant, they realized it was a truck on the street directly above. They could hear it through the nearest sewer grate, then they heard its air brakes lock with a prolonged reptilian hiss.

"That would be Lystrom," Eddie announced. "I had him watching for you to come down here. We've got a big flatbed with tanks on the back, and a few thousand gallons of unleaded gasoline."

Men turned, beginning to run in their cumbersome waders, sloppy half-steps taking them nowhere.

A swift thread of crystalline petroleum fell from the nearest grate, musical and fragrant, landing on the water and too light to sink, too different to mingle, spreading like a spell across the tainted black water.

Trying to smile one last time, Eddie pointed at the wall, saying, "Look! Someone's finishing the painting for me!"

But Macon refused to look. In the end, like a child, he pretended that what he didn't see couldn't be real, and what wasn't real would never want to hurt little him.





# BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

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## CHARLES DE LINT

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*Godmother Night*, by Rachel Pollack, St. Martin's Press, 1996, \$24.95

**B**ACK IN THE tenth installment of this column, we discussed Rachel Pollack's *Temporary Agency* (1994), a companion novel to her *Unquenchable Fire* (1988). Both books were set in an alternative North America where magic is a part of everyday life and I found myself ending the review with the thought that the weakest part of the books was their setting, that what Pollack should concentrate on was her characters and playing them against the real world where, when the supernatural touches our lives, it comes as a shock and a surprise.

Though I doubt she was listening to me, in *Godmother Night* she does just that and the result is an absolute gem of a novel.

There's plenty of magic: the personification of death, known

here as *Mother Night* and accompanied by five motorcycle girls with red hair and leather jackets; the noisy dead, putting on flesh so that they can walk among us, party among us, even cross-dress among us; a mysterious fairy tale wood where a lost child cries over the bones of her brother; strange resurrections at a crossroads graveyard; and many more mystical and magical elements.

But the book centers around Jaque and Laurie, two young women who meet and fall in love in college, and follows their life together as they deal with parental attitudes toward their relationship, try to make a home for themselves, raise their daughter Kate, live real lives. What complicates their lives, beyond the things that complicate all our lives, is that their fates have become entwined with *Mother Night*.

The real world sections are wonderful—by turns tender, gritty, desperately sad and gloriously joyous.



The magical elements play against the moments of their lives, the mundane and the dramatic, entwining amongst them like ivy. Sometimes they are the catalyst for what the women do, sometimes they are the result of their actions.

I wish I could tell you more, because there are plot threads that lead to things I'd love to discuss with you, but doing so would also spoil too much. Let me simply say that this is a wise and wonderful book, an adult fairy tale that neither forsakes the real world, nor forgets the magical, but braids them seamlessly together. And if there is a bittersweet quality to what you find in its pages, that's because Pollack has done her job too well: the women in this book don't seem like characters so much as real people that we genuinely care for.

*City on Fire*, by Walter Jon Williams, HarperPrism, 1997, \$22

First off, let me tell you that while this is a sequel to *Metropolitan* (1995), familiarity with that earlier novel isn't necessary to enjoy *City on Fire*. I've been meaning to read *Metropolitan* myself ever since it first came out, but somehow never got around to it. With *City on Fire* now under my belt, I

plan to read the earlier book at the first chance I get because if it's even half as good as the sequel, it must be wonderful.

*City on Fire* is set in Caraqui, a large city-state that I found myself visualizing as a combination of New York City, Calcutta, and Venice — the latter for its canals and waterways. The backstory (which is undoubtedly what was covered in *Metropolitan*) tells how a young woman named Aiah helped the rebel Constantine overthrow the corrupt government of the city. The present story starts with Aiah's arrival in Caraqui, hoping to get a job from Constantine, who is now a high-placed minister in the city's new government.

I've read any number of novels in which the plucky rebels finally manage to overthrow the despot rulers of some kingdom or planet, but not nearly as many that deal with what strikes me as the equally fascinating story of what those same rebels do once they're running the show themselves. It isn't as easy as one might assume it will be — on the outside, looking in — and in many ways makes for a more engrossing story as the innocents learn their way through political manipulation, compromise, and all the other necessary evils that are required to

keep a government running smoothly. Idealism comes up hard against the practical matters of taxes, ministerial organization and other socio-political realities.

As Williams has set it up, Constantine is in his own element when it comes to all of this. But Aiah, still an innocent as the book opens, is nowhere near as assured. It's her journey from unemployed idealist to heading up and maintaining her own government agency that forms the heart of *City on Fire* and is what makes it such an engaging read.

But Williams doesn't stop there. The novel also deals with the complexities of maintaining a balance between professional and personal relationships (Aiah and Constantine have been, and once again become, lovers), religious fanaticism, civil rights, treachery, and political differences that escalate into outright civil war. And that doesn't even begin to describe the magical elements: the mysterious "plasm" that serves as everything from a power source to currency; the monstrous entity that has been called out of the plasm to aid the new government's efforts and in payment demands human bodies it can inhabit; the mystical Dreaming Sisters whose strange, towering home

contains statues and bas reliefs that take on the aspects of the major players in Caraqui's struggles.

There's enough here for at least a couple more sequels, but don't worry, you won't be left hanging at the end of the book. Just as reading *Metropolitan* first isn't necessary to appreciate the new novel, *City on Fire* is fully satisfying in its own right.

*Enchanter's Glass*, by Susan Whitcher, Jane Yolen Books/Harcourt Brace & Co., 1996, \$17.00

The bad news is that the Jane Yolen Books imprint is no more. The good news is that Yolen at least had the chance to bring into print as many books as she did. Her imprint might have been designated Young Adult (which for some readers seems to translate into: "Avoid at all costs"), but like the best YA editors, she has long been a proponent of fiction that works on many levels, appealing to both adults and younger readers, and many of the books she edited had an undercurrent that was more mature than much of what we see produced by many so-called adult fantasy lines.

Susan Whitcher's *Enchanter's Glass*, playing as it does against

Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, is an excellent example of a novel that can appeal to all ages, and wouldn't be at all out of place filed on the same shelf holding the better YA novels of Patricia McKillip, Diana Wynne Jones, or Susan Cooper.

The story begins when its young protagonist Phoebe finds a piece of glass in the river running near her home — one half smooth and rounded like a globe, the other half broken off. The first thing she does is hold it up to the light to look through it, and by doing so, her world is transformed.

Not immediately. At first she only sees things differently — a local antique merchant appears to be an evil wizard, a boy from her neighborhood looks like a faun — but then she crosses over to the world she can see through the glass and finds it peopled by allegorical variations of friends and family from the real world. This place, that a friend at one point describes as the "Life of the Mind," proves at once strange and familiar. Here a tiny toy village that Phoebe created as a child and later abandoned is now life-size. A make-believe enchanted glade is no longer make-believe. A bridge crossing the river near her home becomes a dangerous place of magic.

To her dismay, Phoebe soon realizes that it's up to her to find the way out of the Life of the Mind, and incidentally, rescue its inhabitants, who exist as only shadows of themselves in the real world.

As is often the case in YA novels, there are moral lessons set forth. Happily none of them are delivered in a heavy-handed manner, but instead, grow naturally out of the story. Whitcher has a gift for characterization and the deft turn of phrase; her prose strays into the lyrical, but is never flowery. The resonances of *The Faerie Queene* are unabashedly obvious, but not out-of-place because they work. And while they are only conversational asides at times, there is some insightful discussion into what it means to make and appreciate music, and how our imaginations can both help and hinder us.

At one point two characters are discussing events in the novel, wondering if they are real or made up. They're both, one of them decides. They're real because they made them up.

"But...what does it make us?" the other asks.

"Poets," is the perfect reply.

*Enchanter's Glass* is a delight from start to finish; lyrical, with a touch of *Alice in Wonderland*

absurdity and a compassionate heart. And unlike too much of today's fantasy, whether written for adults or younger readers, it will bear up to many rereadings.

What's unfortunate is that Whitcher's novel is one of the last of the books to appear under the Jane Yolen Books imprint, because we could use more fantasies of this quality to bring new readers into the fold at the same time as it

charms those of us who are already enthusiasts.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. ☞

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# BOOKS

## ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

*Distress*, by Greg Egan, HarperPrism, \$21 (Millennium, £16.99)

I REMEMBER how it was when I first started reading science fiction (am I sounding like an old fart now or what?). I was anywhere between eight and twelve years old, and reading lots of anthologies, marveling at stories like Lewis Padgett's "Mimsy Were the Borogoves" and Arthur C. Clarke's "The Possessed." Not all of the stories I loved back then have survived the test of time, but they all lit me up like no other brand of reading. And it wasn't — as it is, I gather, for some people — the sense of adventure that got me, though some of the stories did have that. It was something more conceptual, an overwhelming intellectual thrill, that they gave me — an almost dizzying revelation of cosmic implications and possibilities that I had never met with anywhere else.

I don't know when that stopped

happening for me so much. Maybe I'd read too much of it, and its amazements had ceased to be so amazing; or maybe I'd aged, and lost my proclivity for such raw intellectual excitement. At some point I stopped reading much SF, and when I came back to it I found I was reading it for different reasons: I was reading it the way I read other kinds of literature, and though SF's unique perspectives and ideas still captivated me, I no longer felt that same instinctive, unalloyed thrill that I vaguely recalled.

It's important to say, though, that I don't think one kind of enjoyment is superior to the other; and, in fact, they can coexist. But I did wonder, as others had done, whether it was I that had changed, or SF.

Greg Egan's most recent novel, *Distress*, shows me that it's neither — or, rather, that neither I nor SF have changed so much that we can't enjoy that same gasping, adrenalized feeling I remember from earlier days. *Distress* is idea-fiction of the first order, full of enough provocative

material for ten novels and handling it all with aplomb, sensitivity, and balance. Egan's previous novels — *Quarantine* (which I reviewed many issues ago) and *Permutation City* — certainly gave us their share of intellectual kicks, but *Distress* turns the volume up considerably. In it, I think, Egan emerges as our principal novelist of conceptual SF.

The book's first couple of lines give a sense of its idea-density: we learn right off that in this world you can talk to the dead; some people are ungendered "asex"; T-shirts are programmed with flashing messages. Egan positions us in this future with a handy choice of viewpoint character: a documentary journalist in the process of filming a program on "frankenscience," biotechnology in the service of disturbing goals (such as the revival of recently deceased bodies in order to question them about their killers). Through him we get an increasingly detailed view of a mid-twenty-first century dominated by genetically engineered biotools that can resculpt the genome, diagnose illness and manufacture cures in minutes, and build whole new landmasses from the raw materials of the oceans. It's a world where the ubiquitous technology of the net has decentralized civilization, leaving the former hearts of cities empty, where the

genetic technologies that could end hunger and sickness are patented and monopolized by private corporations; and where any number of reactionary anti-science groups (with Egan-esque names like Mystical Renaissance, Humble Science!, and Culture First) rally their troops to turn back the technological clock.

And that's all a kind of backdrop to the central plot (though it all ties together in many ways, which is one of the things that makes *Distress* so fascinating). Fresh from his biotech program, Andrew takes an assignment for a profile of a leading physicist, Violet Mosala, starting at a physics conference on the controversial island of Stateless — a place built with stolen biotech, offering an anarchic haven for many of those disenfranchised with the rest of the corporately dominated planet. He thinks it'll be nicely boring after the horrors of frankenscience. But he's barely begun when he's drawn into a whirl of intrigue: is someone plotting to murder the top scientists? And if so, why?

The assassination plot drives the action, but it's not the center of the interest. The real excitement is in the focus of the conference: the presentation of several competing "theories of everything" (TOEs), comprehensive physical systems

that would account for all the structure in the universe, uniting the disparate physical forces such as gravity and electromagnetism into one all-encompassing equation. This is where Egan gets into some tremendously stimulating intellectual territory. I don't want to spoil too much of the book's fun by going into any detail, but suffice it to say that the dominant TOE pushes the subjectivity of quantum mechanics to extremes I've never encountered in SF before.

*Distress* doesn't necessarily have more sheer ideas in it than any other recent SF novel, but it does provide a firmer grounding for them than most: Egan's descriptions of biotech and futuristic physics ring true enough to feel real. (Well, not always; the system that rigs Andrew's metabolism makes all-too-simplistic reference to "melatonin courses" that keep him comfortably awake when necessary, and it's clear already that sleep cycles are much too complex to be regulated by one chemical....) His island Stateless isn't just a magic-wand-waving special effect; he's worked out a lot of the detail, from the softness of the land toward the edges (where the organisms that built the island are still living and growing slowly outward) to the special diatoms that devour particles

eroded from beneath the island and excrete buoyant gasses that keep its extremities afloat. A lot of the believability comes from a liberal sprinkling of evocative terminology, but on the whole it's admirably convincing.

The ideas provide plenty of food for thoughts to grow on, but what makes *Distress* so unusually impressive is the way that Egan weaves Andrew's personal problems and experiences into the pattern. One such is the issue of intimacy and connections to other people: Andrew tends to substitute analysis for empathy, and his relationship with his girlfriend falls apart; he has trouble comprehending his documentary subject, Mosala; over and over again we see him misinterpreting people's intentions and motives. It's fascinating to watch Andrew grappling with the problem, but it's even more interesting to see how the scientific concepts reflect and elaborate on the issue. One segment of Andrew's biotech documentary focuses on a group of people who have minor autism, and who want to use medical techniques to *enhance* their condition, rather than cure it. Autism, the group's leader explains, is a failure of a small part of the brain that allows us to "model" other people, to think we understand their feelings and

behavior. To the group, that's nothing but a convenient illusion — or delusion — and they want no part of it. "Is intimacy a form of knowledge," asks the group's leader, "or is it just a comforting false belief?"

That question links the whole matter to another of the book's — and Andrew's — persistent issues: is it better to cling to false beliefs, particularly comfortable ones, or to pursue the truth, however troubling it might be? On the large scale, that's the debate between the "ignorance cults" such as Mystical Renaissance and the physicists at the conference, but the issue takes its most compelling form within Andrew himself. He comes to *Stateless* thinking he's a firm believer in facing painful truths, but his experiences there force him to face the deep implications of his scientific beliefs more directly than he ever had before; his time on *Stateless* becomes an extended crisis of faith that gives the various scientific issues a vital human dimension.

By now it's obvious I'm very high on this book, but I must point out that it's by no means perfect. In his enthusiasm for exploring ideas, Egan does sometimes give his characters short shrift. Mosala, for instance, never becomes much of a person; many others likewise seem to exist mainly to provide voices for

different sides in the various debates. (To be fair, there is a chance that this is something calculated on Egan's part: since the book is narrated in first-person by Andrew, it may be indicative of his distanced journalistic viewpoint, his tendency to turn everyone into quotable source. But this possibility isn't supported by anything else in the text.) More annoying is Andrew's persistent ingenuousness. Even late in the book, when he's had his expectations and assumptions overturned time and time again, he remains unbelievably smug in his own point of view. With *Stateless* being invaded by a mercenary army, he marvels at the quiet confidence the population seems to have in their security, though they're clearly outclassed by the mercenaries' firepower. "Everything's going to be just fine," a group of citizens tells him, amused by his concern. Andrew responds by wondering "what kind of drugs they were on," though he's already seen enough of *Stateless* that he ought to entertain the notion that they really do have something up their sleeves.

Even with such imperfections, *Distress* is an immensely enjoyable and provocative book, awash in the kind of intellectual excitement that only SF can provide. It'll set your brain on fire. Mine's still burning. ♣





## EDITOR'S RECOMMENDATIONS

**M**Y FAVORITE book of recent months isn't really sf or fantasy — it's Karen Joy Fowler's second novel, *The Sweetheart Season* (Henry Holt). The story follows a team of young women working for a Minnesota company that produces breakfast cereals over the course of their 1947 season in a woman's baseball league. Like Fowler's first novel, *Sarah Canary*, the book has at its center a woman who may or may not entirely be there — in this case, it's the ghost of the company founder's wife — but the beauty of the novel lies in its evocation of the post-war period and the terrific story of a daughter and her (single) father. I'd love to shuffle the pages of this book with those of Michael Bishop's baseball novel *Brittle Innings* and see if Irini Doyle and Danny Boles end up as a couple.

Damon Knight's classic collection of criticism, *In Search of Wonder* (Advent), is now in its third

edition, forty years after it was first published. There are half a dozen essays new to the volume, most of which have appeared elsewhere, but all of which are worth reading. Also worth reading, if you haven't gotten to it yet, is Knight's most recent novel, *Humpty Dumpty: An Oval* (Tor), a tale brimming with wonderful wordplay and extreme strangeness — real, genuine, almost-knowable strangeness.

Mystery writer Jake Page's first SF novel, *Operation Shatterhand* (Del Rey), started off like a top-flight alternate history novel, but ultimately felt a bit disappointing. The idea is terrific: what if a desperate German army in 1944 launched an invasion of the United States through Mexico into Arizona? The ensuing story is a good read with a great feel for the desert and for the period, but my favorite character — Ben Cameron, the leader of the US efforts to repel the Nazis — spent too much time off-stage and left me wanting more.

The past few months have been good ones for short story collections. Among the many are Ray Bradbury's *Quicker than the Eye* (Avon), a reprint of Harlan Ellison's *Stalking the Nightmare* (bound with *Spider Kiss* in *Edgeworks 2* [White Wolf]), which contains his wonderful three lessons of life, Jonathan Lethem's edgy *The Wall of the Sky, The Wall of the Eye* (Harcourt Brace), Richard A. Lupoff's eclectic *Before... 12:01... and After* (Fedogan

& Bremer), Michael Bishop's equally diverse *At the City Limits of Fate* (Edgewood Press), and *Killdozer!* (North Atlantic Books), the third volume that Paul Williams has fabulously assembled of the complete stories of Theodore Sturgeon. Almost all of these collections reprint stories from this magazine; all of these collections offer rich rewards. They should be available through one distributor or another if you can't find the titles at your local bookstore. ¶

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*Kit Reed is the author of such novels as Magic Time, Captain Grownup, Little Sisters of the Apocalypse, and J. Eden, as well as the thrillers published under the name "Kit Craig," Gone and Twice Burned. Her last appearance in these pages was "The Singing Marine" in October/November 1995. That terrific tale was a finalist for the World Fantasy Award. Now she takes us east, to India—the real India, not what the tourists see. Or is it?*

# Rajmahal

*By Kit Reed*

SALLY

THE MANAGER TELLS US THAT the Rajmahal is very old. He says the palace was built by a Rajput ruler just to please the princess Mrinal, his beautiful

wife. Gary squeezes my hand and I squeeze back; we are so excited! From the pavilion we can see the roofs of the palace and the surrounding walls of the fort; we can see the whole mountainside below and the village at the bottom, at the lip of a desert that seems thousands of miles wide. Gary and I are alone with the manager, and he says call him P.K. The twilight is sweet; the view is brilliant, and for the moment Gary and I can almost forget we're traveling with the Minneapolis Adventure Club.

The manager says the corrugated ramps in the palace were ridged so the ruler's elephants could carry treasure — gold, silks, new brides? to this beautiful pavilion at the top.

Was Mrinal happy with her prince in the Rajmahal? How could she not be happy in this palace with lacy screens between the rooms and

marble underfoot? How could I not be happy with my boyfriend Gary in a stone wedding cake on a Rajasthani mountaintop?

Oh, India. Oh wow.

It's like Oz with dust.

And the Rajmahal! To get here, you come through gates higher than eight elephants standing on each other's backs; the walls are so thick you think, my God, what were they afraid of, that they made this palace so hard to reach? And then you think, Whatever it is, is it going to get me? You climb and go through still more walls; you keep going up! The manager says the hairpin curves are to confound enemy elephants. You almost give up. Then, bang, you're at the top. It is so high!

But first you pass through the most adorable little village. Darling kids come out and laugh and wave. The manager says the villagers have a wonderful relationship with the palace — after all, it used to be their park, and before the owners took it over and began restoring the Rajmahal to its former glory, they used to wander uphill all times of the day and night to play on the grounds and throw parties in the ruins of the palace. The manager says, You know how these people are, but I don't.

Before the owners took it over the Rajmahal was such a wreck it's a wonder the villagers weren't hurt or worse, plunging into unmarked pitfalls or getting bopped by rocks or falling into the great big stone hole out front, which the brochure says is an old water tank. The manager says really the Rajput rulers put their prisoners of war down there, along with their rivals in love; this place is so rich in history!

And this will tell you something about India. When the last Rajput ruler lost the place to invaders, his women chose death before dishonor and hurled themselves into the tank. Except the princess Mrinal. The manager says she died spectacularly, and all for love; she threw herself off the parapet just as the enemies breached the last wall and came boiling into the palace, putting an end to life the way it used to be.

I look at Gary, thinking: *Would you die for me?* Death before dishonor; I can't put my finger on it yet, exactly, but I know how they feel.

You can imagine the violence. Rubble everywhere, you can still see traces: raw holes in some of the ceilings, toppled towers. Then the villagers moved in on the place — goats, camels, the works. You can guess

what that was like. The graffiti alone! When the new owners took over, the fort and the palace were practically wrecked.

The manager took us around and showed us everything they're doing — restoration is the word. They have people cementing ornamental screens and rebuilding foliated arches and trying to put everything back the way it was when the Rajput princes were here. Lord, you could see where entire tops of towers had been blown away and there are these staircases that just — *break off*, so if you were, like, climbing in a hurry, not looking where you were going? You'd pitch into nowhere with your legs still moving in midair.

The villagers are lucky to have somebody as enlightened as the Ashok family with the wherewithal to come in here and protect their greatest asset, this living monument. Before the Ashoks, the place was open to just anybody, which meant rock fights and dirt bike races and graffiti up to here. Well now, they only allow visitors once a year, but hey, it's for the good of the Rajmahal. A few more months of village parties and scooter races, and the place would have been an irretrievable wreck.

They should be grateful, right?

The manager says the people in the village are just like friendly children, he says they're going to love us, but he won't let us walk down the elephant path or stray outside the gates at night. Too many treacherous rocks and bad places in the road, he says, too dark, he says, too near dinnertime. Too this, too that. The manager says the people who work here have given their lives to the palace, and that they all love the Rajmahal as much as we love being here. P.K. says they're all committed to our comfort and safety, but when he leaves us he says please stay within the precincts and mind the *chowkidar*.

What he said was, wandering the parapets at night just might be hazardous to your health, but before we had the fight, Gary and I tried it and it wasn't all that scary. My boyfriend Gary, *who I thought I knew* before we started on this trip, the rat! People said, watch out, India may be hazardous to your health. Well it turned out to be hazardous to our relationship. We need to get someplace where there are *no people*, so we can have it out.

The manager begs us to wait till morning because of the hazards, but what does he know? India is just like Oz, with dust.

But the palace gates are locked so we're stuck here tonight, Gary and I and, okay, and Myrna, along with the rest of our exclusive group of homefolks. The Rajmahal has only twelve finished rooms so space is limited, one reason it costs so much. Myrna, for instance, is bunking in a closet since she's a single; even if they do call it Kismet, I think she's sleeping on a shelf. There's no room for other tourists, so we're stuck with our same group. So, mostly we wait for dinner and wonder what to do until it's time for bed.

If you want to know the bedrock, bottom line truth, gorgeous as it is, the Rajmahal is getting just a little boring. One big problem is, no TV. I suppose that makes me sound superficial, but listen. Plus the electricity is out and we've all been lunging around the palace with lanterns and stumpy little candles that you can't keep on too long or you'll use up yours and you won't get another until tomorrow, if you last that long.

And even though we're all old friends back home in the States, we're getting kind of sick of our group. Our very first day in India, this Myrna went out to some store and got the cutest little vest with a funny standup collar. Within two days everybody had a vest, you know, like the Indian gentlemen wear? With the standup collar. The next day it was mirrorwork. Next it was rugs and yesterday, our fourth day in India, everybody came back with smoky topaz, cufflinks for the guys and for us, earrings, and Gary gave me a huge topaz to make up for some of the things he said.

Travel is amazing. We've learned so much about India that we feel right at home. And tomorrow we're going downhill into the adorable village, listen, we can shop! And if the cards fall right, I'll be the one who discovers the new thing — maybe those cute turbans some of the Indians wear — and I'll be the first in the group to lead everybody to the new shopping bonanza, wherever it is, so we can buy more *things*. Tomorrow we'll come back up to the palace wearing something I personally discovered, and that will show this Myrna with her black hair and her Barbie doll body, all right?

But right now it's too dark to read and there's no TV and the Minnesota Adventure Club is hissing like a nest of wasps, I am sick of the sight of them, and the manager won't let us go *anywhere* so we're bored, and listen, this may be one great escape just like the brochure says it is but it's boring and I'm sorry, okay?

So we're up here bored, Gary and I, in the pavilion where the Rajput ruler probably betrayed his princess Mrinal, which is probably why she jumped off, because princes get bored too; he betrayed her with dozens of women on those dense nights when the air was still tolerable and the hot wind blew the sand up from the Rajasthani desert with summer following like a tiger, devouring life.

Rotten Gary and I sit at opposite corners of the pavilion like bored princes and wonder what we're going to do with the rest of our time here. With the rest of our lives. It's not my fault I found out about Gary and Myrna; listen, on top of everything we aren't speaking, not one word since the fight.

*PREM KUMAR*

**H** EAVEN KNOWS I admire the Ashok family for what they are trying to do here and they value me; have they not made me the manager? But I am hard put to keep the guests happy and quiet in the absence of electricity and no water to bathe. I have tried to explain that sited at the edge of the desert as we are, we must avoid conspicuous consumption of water — one shower here uses more water than a woman from the village can carry on her head. But how can I tell Americans that the generators haven't really failed, that we've just turned off the power to keep from enraging the villagers, who have had no electricity in their homes since the regional power failure some weeks ago?

That is, the ones whose houses are in fact electrified. Understand, I know better than anyone that we here at Rajmahal are in an unhealthy situation of dramatic contrasts. Our opulence, with Rolls Royces parked in the courtyard and VCRs. Their lives. But I must be quiet and protect the guests. It is after all my job here, and I have a family in Kashmir depending on the rupees I send home. The money that comes with my position.

The money that comes with my position! That's a laugh. My monthly income from this job would not put a dent in the wallets of our wealthy guests, who throw the gems of India around like so many unwanted sweets. And my own income beggars what trickles down to the villagers at the bottom of the hill. Well that is their problem. I have my job here,

I have my obligation to keep silent about the grumbling in the town — to the guests, at least — and I have my obligation to keep the villagers off the property, no matter what. Isn't that enough?

The villagers. Why can't the beggars understand that they stand to profit here? It's not my fault the owners ordered three hundred ornamental urns from one potter and three hundred from another, took them on consignment but never paid and never picked up the items? Why can't the fellows take their goods and offer them to the palace patrons, sweetening it in souvenir terms by painting on the name of the place? There is profit to be made here, as you can see. And the potters are only one example.

So I must encourage the guests to go down into the village — by day, of course — and send along staff to follow at a safe distance — and entreat our tourists to cover themselves instead of going about in shorts. And watch them go off with their cameras and their pockets full of rupees like large children, and hope the day goes well. And hope the foreigners' ears are not attuned to the local grumble, because the management wants them to believe that the village is there for their entertainment, and it does not want them even to guess there may be unhappiness in the town.

Daily I wave goodbye. And watch how these large children behave. And listen. And learn from them insofar as I can, because I do not intend to spend the rest of my life as a manager. Nor will I, if I can keep the stupid foreigners from getting hurt on the parapets at night or blundering where they shouldn't. And if I can keep the kitchen help from spitting in the food or forgetting to wash the vegetables before they shred them into the relish tray. And if I can manage — most of all — to keep my ear to the ground in the village, where even the air is growing sour. It's not my fault that the owners have brought in help from Uttar Pradesh and employed only twelve of them, and it's not my fault that they can't come into a place that they used for so long as if it were their property!

And now there is a new problem. This weekend's batch of tourists from the state of Minnesota, America is bumptious at best, laughing on the stairs and fighting on the balconies so their quarrels carry through every courtyard. Perhaps it's just as well they don't know how much I understand of what they say here.



This couple for instance — Sally it is, this Sally and Gary.

They don't even guess that I have heard them fighting. Or that I understand. But I heard this Sally tell her Gary that she was sick of their relationship, the lying, that everything they stood for was false and that she was going to find true, uncomplicated love this weekend, perhaps even in the village.

"Listen," she said, "you can't look down on these people just because they're poor, and foreigners. At least they are sincere. And besides, some of the young men are — well. You saw them waving when the bus came through, and the one that waved — frankly, he was gorgeous!"

And her Gary said, "He wasn't waving, he was shaking his fist because our bus took a chunk off the corner of that building."

"No," she said, the fool! "I think it was some kind of Islamic gesture of greeting." Islamic! What a fool!

And her Gary in his own ignorance. "What makes you think these people are Hindus?" Islamic Hindus? How ignorant can you be?

Who am I to set them straight?

"I don't know what they are," she said, "but you know what I mean. He was, you know, trying to get in touch!"

"Sure," he said to her. "Like you know all about India."

And this is what she told him. "No," she said, "I don't know. Not yet," she said, "not really. But tomorrow morning first thing I'm going down into the village and find out, okay?"

And the way he yelled out, "Okay!" I knew it was not agreement but a primitive cry of anger.

So tomorrow I must be careful. The woman is determined to get up early and stray before I have a chance to warn the chowkidar or set someone to go along — at a discreet distance of course — to be sure she does not get us all into terrible trouble. And I must do all this without infringing on this Sally's, what is it Americans say, infringing on her "freedom," or I will hear about it from our owners.

They have not a golden monkey's idea how precarious is our position here. But I know how precarious mine is. Silence is the word. No. Survival. I have a position here and I must be ready to do whatever is necessary to protect it.

## TAMAS

Not my fault I am the angriest. Not my fault that I see what is going on and have no power to prevent it. Not my fault that I saw the pretty red-haired American woman waving to me from the bus as they rode in last night or that we exchanged significant glances before the thing roared around the corner, almost smashing three dogs under the wheels and scattering pigs and almost hitting one of our children.

The children! How can I, Tamas Kanoji, protect them from what is going on here — the anger of Surjit and the others, the venality of the shopkeepers, the carelessness of the visitors to the palace? For eighteen months now, ever since outsiders discovered the Rajmahal and began the renovations, the village has been stewing. Surjit and most of the other young men who sit at the smoke shop and watch the road are angry, going on furious. "Look at them," Surjit says when another bus roars by, or another pair of glossy vans or a new Mercedes, so shiny that it awes the onlookers even as they rage at the intrusion. "They owe us something!"

"Look," Amar says, "through our roads and up our driveway and into our monument without so much as a by-your-leave and without a backward look or even a hundred rupees per capita for payment, straight into our place, our PALACE, our very own property that has been appropriated under the guise of preservation of a public monument. It's time to rise up and make them pay for all the rupees that they have failed to pay us!"

Meanwhile Surjit suggests we barricade the approach to the gates with stones and keep it closed until the owners pay us a hundred thousand rupees for the insult and guarantee every villager employment. His girlfriend and her girlfriends are willing to put on little caps and aprons if necessary, and bow and scrape just long enough to make running-away money so they can go to live in Jaipur, or go up north to the big-city life in Delhi.

But Amar wants — not blood, exactly, but some kind of retribution. "They have ignored us long enough," he says, trying to organize it. "They have gotten in their big red vans and rolled right over us. I am through lying down and taking it."

Only the shopkeepers have kept Amar from tipping the elephant so

it falls over and demolishes the structure. For they see there is profit to be made from the situation if only they can figure out how to lure the foreigners into their shops and separate them from their rupees. If they have their way we will have painted marquees over all the shops and if the power ever comes back we will have neon characters chasing themselves across our modest buildings. Gujar already has a generator and is designing a lighted banner to put over his shop; in big red characters it will say, **BIG BARGAINS. COME TO GUJAR'S EMPORIUM.**

It breaks my heart, this foolishness. And look what it is doing to my children!

Yes, mine. When you are schoolmaster, all the children of the village are your children.

And since the vans of the wealthy started kicking up dust and scattering pigs and goats on their heedless way up the hill to the Rajmahal, something terrible has happened to my schoolchildren. They laugh and wave and tell the foreigners good morning, crying for joy, "Good morning!" they leave my classroom to follow the strangers all over the village. At first even I found it rather charming, but then one of the foreigners turned around to Ameeta, pretty little Ameeta who is the smartest and my favorite, and tossed her a note — dear heaven, fifty rupees! That was the beginning. Now when she hears the foreigners' vans and busses or hears their funny nasal voices in the road outside, she and all the others run out of my school yard and take to the streets to follow, and the devil take anything I might be trying to do in the schoolroom. My soul, it is enough to wring tears from a stone elephant.

"Oh look!" a foreign woman cries. That voice! "They are so cute! Come over here, honey, let me take your picture next to that camel."

Terrible. It makes me want to side with Amar the militant against Surjit and against the shopkeepers — anything to keep our village fresh and our children safe from rank venality.

But now, suddenly, my heaven, I look out of my school yard gate — children scattered like puppies, fawning and laughing at the most beautiful pink woman I have ever seen, a redheaded woman in acid-washed jeans like the ones I have seen in Delhi, my foreign beauty from the bus, and here she is wandering in the mud among the children — my children — and raising her pink hands to scatter candy and crying, "Good morning, good

morning!" and I am embarrassed that my darlings are not studying English — no time yet in our curriculum, the streets will teach them — and so they cry, "Good-bye, good-bye," and think that they are greeting her. This would leave me pleased and a little proud of their friendliness except for this one thing. They look at her and smile, but all the time my poor corrupted children are thinking: Well enough, madam, but how many rupees for this smile?

Or maybe they are not. She is so attractive! "Good morning," she cries, "Good-bye! What are your names? Oh how adorable. I will call you..." She is at a loss but she brightens with that smile that lures me out of the door and into her aura, "You can call me Sally."

"Sally." "Sah-lee," they work on it. And out of my own mouth tumbles the most amazing thing.

"And I am Tamas," I say. "I am the schoolmaster."

Puzzled, she squints at me, and then brightens. "Oh, do you know English?" And embarrassed by her incomprehension — is it my pronunciation? I smile and nod my head.

Her smile is like a gift. "I'm so glad!"

I would follow her anywhere.

At a distance I see dust — an angry Anglo from the palace, huffing down the road in search of her. "This way," I say quickly, before she sees him following. "I will take you to meet our best potter." And before the fellow can catch us up I have whisked her around a corner and so we have the rest of the day together.

I manage this by dismissing the children. I may not be able to keep discipline since the foreigners have come to distract us, but by heaven I can keep them at a distance, so they do not disturb.

Then I take this beautiful lady along the little road outside the village to the ruined temple, where we wander like two lovers who have been predestined to meet.

"Sally!" A man's voice follows us. "Where are you?"

She shakes her head and murmurs, for me alone, "I've brought some American chocolate and some Bisleri water."

And so we have a feast there in the shadows.

But the foreigner's voice is getting closer: "Sally, it's Gary. Where are you?"

And next to me in the shadow of the wall this beautiful creature puts her fingers to her mouth: Shhhh.

Oh yes my darling Sally, we will shhhh.

Throughout the long morning and into the afternoon I hear the foreigner calling her: "Sally, it's Gary. I'm sorry about everything. Wherever you are, come on, come ON." As I lead her through my village, we run ahead of his cries. I know every half-inch of this place so I can show her how to dodge this way and that, visiting this shopkeeper and that coffee shop. Her rejected lover's voice follows us around corners and behind hills and just behind it follow the children's voices, my class, they are so swift at learning the language! "Cahm ahn, cahm ahn," if they hang with this Gary for long enough they will pick it up and syllabus or no, tomorrow I will introduce English lessons to my students.

At the top of his lungs he grieves for her. "I'm sorry. It's over. What more can I say?"

My beautiful redheaded Sally ignores his cries. She and I learn to understand each other's English. We begin to understand more. We understand that when night falls we may find a way and a place to be together — it is so exciting! And if at bottom I am disturbed by this encounter — the danger of being spoiled by the foreigners, like a village, swept away and somehow undone by the opulent atmosphere of the palace — I find it hard to escape what is between us, or slow down, much less stop it happening.

I try to find a place where we can be alone. Outside the town there is a ruined monument, all that is left to us of the precincts of the Rajmahal. Perhaps because it was too far from the palace to be defended, the Rajput princes abandoned it soon after it was built, but the ruins live on — the temple next to our huge and stunningly empty tank. And except for the families living in the shadows of the surrounding walls, we are alone.

"Oooh," my Sally says. "This is truly India."

I cannot bear to tell her that it is not as simple as this.

Sitting together on the bottom-most step of the tank, we raise our palms, touching fingertips.

We are in the grip of something extraordinary, held like preserved flowers in plastic, breathless, in suspension.

In the depths of our communion at the tank, on the brink of love and already beyond understanding, she takes my hands and looks into my eyes and says my name — "Tamas," she says, and unlikely as it is, here at the lip of the universe, we are close, so close! to happening.

"Sally."

And she looks into my eyes and says from somewhere deep, "You are my India."

So it is my fault that we were so disrupted by love that I lost track and the dusk had crept up from the Rajasthani desert before I understood what was going on behind us. Going on in the bowels of the town. In the dark. Without my knowing.

The forces of anger had broken the dam of reason, flooding the streets like a million monsoons.

And because I was in love I lost the power to prevent it.

I was so enthralled that I even lost the power to protect her.

My fault, then, that while I was waylaid thus, beguiled, Amar had raised his troops and accomplished almost everything he threatened. The blockade of stones, laid so silently that nobody noticed. The barricade of camel drivers. By the time the first cries of anger rose and the foreigners cut adrift and stranded in the town found themselves unable to go uphill, and by the time the first cars from the palace found it impossible to come downhill to help them; by the time my villagers took up sticks and tools and began mixing it up with the chowkidars from the place; by the time the camels grew disturbed by the racket and began to rustle in the road and stampede, charging us; by that time, and before the police came, it was too late for me to prevent the accident.

My Sally, running ahead of me in the road with her red hair streaming and her arms spread, crying, "Oh stop, please don't, please don't hurt each other!"

My Sally, with me running after crying, but in such distress that I fell into my own language and there was no way for her to hear, much less heed my warning, "My love, my Sarah, watch out, watch out!"

My fault, then, and not the camel driver's.

And above her last, great cry of pain and love as the hoofs of the camel overtook my red-haired beloved and extinguished her, the voice of Amar, my champion, my nemesis, Amar triumphantly bashing one of the palace-

wallahs and shouting and the police van roared to the spot, too late to save Sally but in time to quell the insurrection, "That'll show the bastards!"

Our fault, the village's, for what they have turned us into.

And my fault for letting my attention wander for that short, idyllic day and so make disaster befall my life, my love, my village!

I loved her.

I loved my village.

I loved my children.

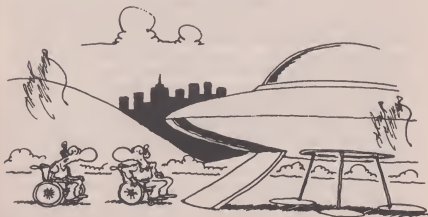
And with all the love in the world I was powerless to help them.

I am leaving my job and my village now. I can no longer hold up my head there. I am going into the desert to die if I can manage it. I am no good here. I am no good to my self. I am no good to the village, cut off by police lines and barbed wire from the palace, which is defunct as a resort because of the happenings. I am no good to anyone — I loved her! There is nothing in this life beyond love and failure and no future.

For in that brief day that fell like a stone knife between past and present, Sally became my future.

I am sorry about what happened to her.

— New Delhi, January 13, 1992 ✍



*"Yes, I know it's wheelchair accessible,  
but I still don't think we should go in"*

*M. Shayne Bell is the author of Inuit and the editor of Washed by a Wave of Wind: Science Fiction from the Corridor. He writes that this story "began as a play I wrote for a woman I met from Irkutsk, Siberia, in 1987. A member of the USSR Academy of Sciences, Department of Foreign Languages, she taught English to scientists coming to the west. She asked me to write a play for her that would teach certain grammatical concepts, yet tell a story." This adaptation of the play tells a story of sunny days—perhaps a bit too sunny...*

# Bright, New Skies

*By M. Shayne Bell*

I TOOK MY BROKEN GOG-  
gles to the UV-protective goggles store  
built into the dike across from the  
World Trade Center. The wheelhouses

of two Siberian cargo ships, docked behind the store to unload wheat, towered above the dike, and I could not stop looking at them because I remembered the days when America exported wheat to my country of Siberia, not the other way around. When Mother could get American wheat, she would bake it into bread early in the morning, and she would laugh at my five brothers and me after the aroma made us tumble out of bed and hurry into the kitchen, rubbing our eyes. "What will this country come to," she'd say, "if capitalist bread can pull even young communists out of bed?"

But that was a long time ago.

"Lady, either go in the store or get off the sidewalk."

Complete stranger. High voice but a man, I guessed — I could not see under his burnoose for physical confirmation. His New Jersey accent told



me nothing more than place of origin. I forced myself not to appear startled — not to show any sign of weakness in front of him. The science of biology can teach you that, teach you not to startle, but to observe and record. Biology had startled me many times, but I had flinched only once, not very long ago. I did not flinch in front of this man. I pulled my chador tighter around me and walked toward the store, wary of the man behind me on the sidewalk, listening for any sound that he was moving toward me. I was in a good part of New York City, I kept telling myself. Nothing bad should happen to me here.

But part of me kept saying that this *was* New York, not Irkutsk, that I was in a temperate land now, not a polar, and that things were different here. You never knew. The very conference on ozone depletion I had come to speak at had collapsed, and in a world where things like that could happen despite the desperate evidence outside the conference doors, anything at all could happen. Anything.

Bells jangled when I opened the door. The store was cool. The man did not follow me inside. I closed the door and looked back out at the man as I did so. He was standing there, watching me. Sunlight glinted on goggles under his burnoose. He could have easily walked around me, so I did not know what made him angry enough to order me off the sidewalk. Maybe he belonged to one of the sects that kept women indoors where their skins would never burn and he thought I should not be out like this.

"Can I help you?" asked a clerk, dim in her chador in shadows behind a counter, Greenwich Village accent.

I considered asking her to call the police, but I decided to calm myself. The man outside could be merely a religious fanatic, not a pervert, in which case a three-cabbie cab would do as well for me as the police if I needed help leaving this place: one of the expensive cabs, with a driver, a bodyguard riding shotgun in the front passenger seat, and the bodyguard's rifle that Americans counted as the third cabbie. I realized the man could also be following me, keeping tabs on where I went; the worst that would happen then would be that more company executives would track me down and try to talk to me, try to pay me money for what I had discovered, as if that were what I would want — me, from Siberia, a woman with memories of an old-fashioned, communist mother who would have been ashamed of me for taking it. My discoveries were worth more than money:

they were worth the sight in animals' eyes. I could stop the rush of blindness in all species. But even so, I could not decide whether to announce my discoveries. I would have to change a species forever to save its sight — genetically enhance it; ensure, through adaptation, the final destruction of the world we knew and the creation of a new. I could not sell such techniques for money. If I decided to use them, I had to give them to a company that would use them well, and quickly, and sell its procedures cheaply. Doing that, at least, would have made my communist mother proud.

"Can I help you?" the clerk asked again, genuine concern in her voice this time. I let the kindness of her concern wash over me.

"Yes," I said, but then I stopped. It was a day for worries, and maybe even shock. On the counter next to the clerk stood a stuffed penguin wearing Xavier-Briggs UV-protective goggles, smiling as if it were as happy on top of a glass case as it would have been on a beach, and all I could do was stare at it. I hadn't seen a penguin, alive or stuffed, since I'd left Antarctica one year before. "Who did that to a penguin?" I asked. I did not have to add: one of the last penguins.

"It's not real. Feel it. It's fake. Marketing ploy — you've seen the TV ads? But the stuffed animals they make these days look so real, don't they?"

I nodded and forced myself to look away from the penguin, pulled my broken goggles out of an inside pocket of my chador. That made me remember to throw back the hood, take off my borrowed goggles, and run my fingers through my hair. I was always forgetting to throw back the hood of my chador when I walked in a store, and I wasn't always in a hurry.

"Prescription or merely protective?" the clerk asked.

"Protective. My eyes are still good."

"Lucky you. We have to send out for prescription, and that can take an hour. Go ahead and look around at what we have in stock. Try on anything."

I walked off down an aisle of goggles, wondering if she'd said *lucky* you because I wouldn't have to wait or if she meant to comment on the fact that my eyes were still good. I glanced back out the door. The man was still standing on the sidewalk, looking into the store. If he worked for Xavier-Briggs or some other company that had hired him to follow me — and if

I could prove it — I'd sue them for harassment. I passed cases of diamond-studded goggles, then rows of fluorescent orange and green goggles. I needed a pair of good work goggles.

The clerk walked over to me. "Should I call the police about that man outside? Is he a threat to you?"

"I don't know," I said. "He ordered me off the street, and that was the first time I heard his voice. I remember voices, so I don't know him. But he's just standing there, looking at us."

"I'm calling the police."

She called them on a phone on the wall behind her cash register, then she walked to the front door and locked it. "They're coming," she said.

The man just kept standing on the street, looking into the store.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I did not come here to disrupt your business."

"It happens," she said with a shrug. "But I have your accent now. You're from Siberia, aren't you?"

So she played the game, too. Picking out accents was a game I'd played with expatriot friends I made at Columbia when I was a visiting professor there. We tried to learn what we could about a person from the voice, now that people everywhere hid in clothes for protection against the sun. Voices told more about people than I ever imagined. I could now hear if a man were fat or if a woman were anorexic or if someone were developing skin cancer, all from the voice. My mother claimed to be able to tell what *kind* of skin cancer people were developing, just from the words they spoke about other things.

"Yes. I'm Siberian," I said. "From Irkutsk."

"You came for the conference?"

I nodded.

"What do you study?"

"Ecosystems, and how to adapt them to the new world."

"Ah, that explains why the penguin upset you. They aren't adapting, are they?"

"I will not buy anything made by Xavier-Briggs," I said, looking back at the begoggled penguin on the counter. All my life I had talked about adapting, with all kinds of people about all kinds of adaptations. I walked down an aisle, looking at the goggles. I saw goggles with little gold crosses on the sides, and I thought of the finely wrought Russian Orthodox church

near my mother's house and how I had talked with her about adaptation there. The communists had made it into a museum, and my mother was proud of that. She used to take me there to see the art on display, art confiscated from private owners after the revolution and now set out for all the people to see. One day we arrived early in the morning. The curator was just opening for the day, and we met him outside on the steps. He was scraping wax off the steps and sweeping up the remains of candles that had burned down in the night. "They make such a mess here," he said.

"Who?" I asked, in my little girl's voice.

My mother looked sharply at me. "The superstitious in this town who won't give up trying to worship here," she said.

"Why?" I asked. "It's a museum now. Why do they want to burn candles on the steps?"

"Because they think this place is holy, whether we call it a museum or not," the curator said, and he swept the candles into a garbage pail and we all walked inside. I thought and thought about those people, whoever they were, trying to do on the steps what the church had been built for, and thinking about them and their disappointments made me cry. Mother took me outside, and we sat on the steps while I stopped crying. There were still flecks of wax on the steps by my shoes. I reached down to brush them away, into the grass. My mother was not cross with me. "A lot of people cried when we made this place a museum," she said. "But a new world had come to us back then, and we all had to adapt to it. In the case of the people who valued this place as a church, we had to force the adaptation, for their own good. It's turned out all right. Forced adaptations might be painful at first, but only at first. In a generation, no one will think of this place as anything but a museum."

In spite of those words, I'd gone on to spend my life trying to keep things the way they were, trying to find ways for the natural world to survive as it was without changing it to fit new realities. How I had failed. If I had listened to my mother all those years ago, I would have known that I would fail.

"Have you seen these?"

The clerk held up a pair of goggles with tiny aquaria in the temples. Little blue fish swam in them behind tinted glass.

"We import them from Taiwan," she said.

I took them out of her hands. "How do you feed the fish?" I asked.

"The tops open, here." She opened one for me, then closed it again. "We sell little boxes of food for the fish, along with the goggles."

I tried them on and looked in a mirror. The goggles looked terrible on me, but they were fun. "How much are these?" I asked.

"Four hundred ninety-seven dollars. Plus tax."

I took off the goggles and handed them back. "What I really need is something that can get knocked around in the open," I said. "Work goggles."

"I carry a Swiss line that might be just the thing for you."

She led me to a back corner of the store, and I could hear water there, and distant booms from the unloading of one of the Siberian ships. We were evidently standing at the edge of the dike, fifteen feet below the new sea level. I touched the wall. It was cool but not damp.

The Swiss goggles were fine: black, sturdy frame, scratch-resistant lenses. "I'll take them," I said, and someone knocked on the door. We both looked at the door. Three men in suits stood there. Customers, I thought.

"Meet me at the cash register," the clerk said, and she hurried to unlock the door.

I carried my goggles to the cash register and looked at the penguin. I couldn't help it. It looked so real, and so silly in its goggles. I almost touched it to see if it were fake, after all.

"You can save that species, can't you?" the clerk asked me, back now, at the cash register.

"What do you mean?" I asked. The men in their goggles and burnooses had walked up with her and the man with the Jersey accent was with them, and suddenly I knew. These were all company people. Probably Xavier-Briggs. I did not know what was going to happen. The police were not coming. The clerk had obviously never called them. Her call had brought these men.

"Why don't you do something to save the penguins?" the clerk asked me.

"I would have to destroy them — turn them into something different — to save them," I said. "I'm not sure it's worth that."

"Gifts of nocturnal eyes and nocturnal biorhythms would *save* the species from extinction," one of the men said.

"No," I said. "The penguins would still be extinct. I would just have created a new creature on their basic frame."

"So you *can* do it."

So I'd been tricked. I was admitting too much of what I could do and what I hesitated to put into practice. I put the goggles on the counter.

"No, they're yours." The clerk pushed them toward me. "We'll buy you anything you want from here." She'd kept the Taiwanese goggles with aquaria, and she tried to hand them to me, too. "You at least would take good care of the fish," she said.

I would not touch the goggles. I would not be bought with gifts or money.

"Only the species that can adapt will survive, and not all the ones we need are going to make it," the clerk said. "We have to help them."

And make billions in the process. I'd heard it so many times before, from so many companies. Whoever could finally save the cows, alone, would make billions. My communist mother, the year after the Soviet Union ceased to exist, when she finally gave up hope of it ever coming back, looked at me and said the only people who would survive now would be the ones who adapted to money-grubbing. "Adapt," I spat the word out. "You want me to use what I developed to change the natural world so it can adapt to the ugliness and desperation uncontrolled capitalist corporations brought on the earth. And *that* hasn't changed, has it? You are all still uncontrolled. All I might do if I work with you is prolong a species' suffering."

"You don't believe that," the clerk said. "You were stunned by a stuffed penguin. You came in here to buy goggles to protect your own eyes. If you didn't want to live in a world that might still include penguins, in whatever form, you wouldn't be here to take care of yourself."

I looked down and said nothing. This clerk could read more than accents. And this was an odd conversation, for me. Yes, they had tried to buy me with gifts of goggles. Yes, that gift implied much more. But they hadn't yet talked about what more it implied. They had talked mostly about saving species. These people were a little different, after all. "How do I know any of you will let me give eyes to the penguins?" I asked.

"We have a list of species to save first," the clerk said. "We could let you add some of those you love most to that list. If we start research and testing on your processes now, perhaps by spring we could have cows in fields again."

At night, grazing on the tough grasses inheriting the earth. All the delicate and beautiful soft grasses were gone.

"Your penguins could be next," one of the men said.

"Will you at least talk with us?" another asked. "Xavier-Briggs' bioengineering division is second to none. We can do this work faster than anyone else. You must want things to move quickly now."

"I'll think about this," I said.

"Others will eventually discover what you have," the clerk said. "You should act now while you have a chance to shape the world in ways you want it shaped."

"I'll need time to think about all this," I said. "Let me pay for the goggles and go." I took my credit card from my purse and held it out to the clerk. I knew now that she was no mere clerk, but she had been minding the store, so she had probably been trained to make sales. I was suddenly chilled to think how closely these people had watched me and how accurately they had anticipated my actions and how quickly they had set up this elaborate ruse to talk to me.

The "clerk" took my card and deducted fifty-nine Siberian dollars for the Swiss goggles from my account. I left the Taiwanese goggles on the counter, put on my new goggles, and walked out of the store. No one offered me a ride I would not have accepted. None of them asked where they could find me. I was sure they knew how to find me. I walked along, trying to imagine adding the names of six or seven species to a list of a handful to be saved, and wondering how I would choose and whether I should attempt to set up an entire little ecosystem of saved species that could prey on each other in the new world.

A wind had started blowing, from inland up the Hudson, and it was dusty. I had half an hour to get to the Central Park entrance on Seventy-Ninth Street, meet the three people I'd flown over with, and go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see its controversial exhibit "The Green Hills of Earth: Landscape Painting before Ozone Depletion."

My mother had never joined any of the new political parties in Siberia. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, she never voted again. As I walked along the streets of New York after leaving the goggles shop, I remembered standing once in front of our house in Irkutsk, watching people walk to the

church/museum to vote in a confusing election with candidates from fifteen political parties, and my mother would not go. I could not understand that. She had talked to me so often about how communists could force successful adaptations in society, but now she would not adapt herself to a new society. Remembering that made me suddenly realize that she had been just like me — or that I was just like her, after all: we both wanted the world to stay the way it had been. My mother's world had been communist, and she hadn't wanted it to change. All those years ago, I felt her watching me when I finally set off down the street to vote, and I seemed to feel her eyes on my back again as I walked down these streets in New York City. I felt it so strongly I turned around once, and an old woman was behind me, but she was black and dressed in an ankle-length, black skirt and a long-sleeved, green silk blouse and burnoose, the kind of fine clothes my mother could never have worn because she hardly saw such things in the stores of Irkutsk through most of her life and when they did come she didn't have the money. The black woman smiled at me, and I hurried on to the park.

Savka Avilova, my old friend, stood waiting in front of the park entrance. I could tell it was Savka, even in his abayeh and burnoose. He always stood in a crowd with confidence and interest. I walked straight over to him. "Nadya, how could you tell it was me?" he asked.

I just smiled. "Where are the others?"

"Inside. Come with me to get them."

I looked up at the protective dome that covered the Park. "No," I said.

Savka grabbed my arm and pulled me closer to the entrance. "Smell the air," he said.

The air flowing out of the park smelled of growing plants. Humus. Faintly of lilacs, though it was not their season.

"Come in," he said.

"No," I said again. "Take away this dome and the plants in there would die. I don't find that beautiful. I remember those trees growing without domes over them."

Savka left me and went in after the others. I walked away from the park entrance, back to where the air smelled of dust and exhaust and people who could afford to bathe only once a week, even in summer heat. I bought the week's *Time* at a newsstand. The cover story was on the new



coastal settlements in Antarctica after the ice cap had melted. I didn't turn there first. I started reading about the underwater Swedish cities, and the underwater mines they were developing, and their underwater farms. The Swedes all planned to move into the Baltic. A hundred feet of seawater was the best defense against UV radiation for any fair-skinned man or woman.

I had started reading about the state of Missouri's plans to build a dome over all of Saint Louis when a blind woman walked by, tapping the sidewalk with a metal rod torn from some rusted machine. "I'm hungry and thirsty," she kept saying. "Will someone please buy me food?" No one bought her any food. None of the street vendors handed her anything, especially not a glass of water. She kept tapping her way down the sidewalk. "I'm hungry and thirsty," she said again and again. Midwestern accent. She'd come here from some desertified part of Iowa.

I bought a hotdog and a Coke and carried them to the blind woman. "Here's some food and drink," I said. I told her what I'd brought. She reached out above the food, so I put it in her hands. She did not wear goggles. There was no need. Her eyes were UV blinded, white, the color fading from her irises, like my mother's eyes before she died of skin cancer. My mother had looked at me with those fading eyes and asked me to drive her to Lake Baikal one last time, before she couldn't see it anymore. We spent the day on a rock high above the lake, watching the sunlight on the water, and the clouds reflected there, and when my mother spoke to me that day it was the first time I could hear the skin cancer in her voice: low, and dark behind her words.

"Nadya," Savka called, behind me.

I turned. Savka waved to me. The other two were with him. I left the blind woman and walked back to them: Yegor Grigorovich, Gomel State University, specialist in the treatment of advanced skin cancers; Aruthin Zohrab, Novosibirsk State University, noted for his work in developing UV-resistant strains of wheat; and Savka, Moscow M. V. Lomonosov State University, dreamer, theorist, believer in man's ability to restore the ozone layer.

"You were talking to that blind woman?" Aruthin asked.

I nodded.

"Have you read a newspaper today?" Yegor asked. "The UN Commission on Blindness estimates fifty million people have gone blind in China.

Another hundred million may go blind in the next ten years."

"How can that country go on with so many blind people?" Aruthin asked. "What will they do with them?"

Nothing, I thought. Nothing. I remembered the first time my mother and I had seen a blind Chinese. He had walked across the border and all the way to Irkutsk, somehow, in the fall 10 years before. Mother took him into our home. Neither of us spoke a word of Mandarin, and he knew no Russian. I made him some tea and put the warm cup in his hands, and he held it and tried to stop shaking from the cold. We let him sleep by the stove after supper. He kept holding the teacup — he wouldn't let go of it. In the morning, he was gone. He hadn't taken anything. He'd set the teacup in the middle of the table. We looked for him, but we couldn't find him on the streets around our house, or downtown.

"The museum is just up the street," Savka said. "We should get in line."

We started walking toward the Metropolitan. A line of people stretched from its doors, down the steps, and up a hundred feet of the sidewalk. Everyone in line was waiting to see "The Green Hills of Earth."

"There are still lines," I said. "After five months of exhibition."

"A silly exhibition, fifty years too soon," Aruthin said. "Most of us in this line can remember the Earth as it was. I am going because I love the Constable landscapes on loan here, nothing more."

"At least now we can appreciate your Constables," Yegor said. "Landscape art was undervalued before ozone depletion."

They went on like that, the two of them. Savka and I stood behind them, in line, listening to them talk about art, moving forward step by step.

"What made you give up?" Savka asked me, quietly, suddenly.

"I haven't 'given up'!" I said. I was angry with him for asking such a question, for suggesting such a thing. "My life has been the study of biological diversity and how to preserve it. I will not give up on that."

"But you wouldn't come into the park to see the diversity preserved there."

He couldn't see the world the way I saw it. He thought that domed park a good thing. "We had so much," I said to Savka. "And we have lost so much."

We listened to Yegor and Aruthin talk about art, and to the noise of the traffic on Fifth Avenue. We didn't talk for a time. But I knew Savka well enough to know he wouldn't let this conversation just end. He noticed the *Time* I was carrying.

"You were in Antarctica, weren't you?" he asked. "What is it like?"

"Cold," I said.

"Just cold?"

Where could I start? He was reading me like I knew he could. I'd seen things in Antarctica I hadn't told anyone about. "There's still a lot of ice — at least it seems that way to me," I said. "The sea is completely free of ice."

"Where were you?"

"At Mirnyy. I was there in the summer, so there was always light, glinting off the ice. The glare is softer in the mornings, and the ice looks deep blue then — almost purple."

We walked ahead slowly, maybe five feet, then I looked at Savka and decided to keep talking, to tell him about what had made me flinch in Antarctica: make him see that I hadn't given up though I'd been hurt. "I walked out my first morning there," I said. "I wanted to look at the sea. The morning was quiet. There was no wind. Then I realized it was too quiet — no seabirds were hunting fish. There were no birds at all, I thought, at first.

"But there were still some birds. There were still penguins. I came around a bend in the beach and saw hundreds of them lying there, blind, starving. Many had already died, and the stench was terrible. I knew the penguins were starving when I went to Antarctica: the phytoplankton extinctions led to the extinction of krill the penguins fed on and there was nothing left for them to eat. But it never occurred to me that the penguins would go blind. I hadn't realized how the suffering of their looming extinction would be compounded. Two chicks had just hatched, and I watched them stare up at the sun and try to walk, and I realized they were being blinded, even then, just out of their eggs. I knelt so that my shadow was over their heads for a time and tried to think of a way to save them, but there was no transport for them to a zoo and no way to nurse hatchlings at the base. I had to leave them. I stood up and looked around and I was standing in the middle of all those hundreds of dead and dying penguins, and I could do nothing for them. Nothing, Savka. Nothing."

I'd twisted my *Time* into a tight roll. I unrolled it, then rolled it back the other way to try to get the bend out of it. It was something to do with my hands.

"You two are a somber pair," Aruthin said.

"Here is the museum entrance," Yegor said. "Get out your money."

We paid and went inside, stayed in line for "The Green Hills of Earth." After a time I asked Savka and the others to save my place, and I walked off toward the ladies' room. But once around a corner, I just sat on a bench and looked at the crowds of people coming in to see paintings of an old Earth.

Someone tapped my shoulder, and I looked up at somebody in a burnoose, wearing goggles inside the museum. "Are you just going to sit here, lady, or will you come with me now to talk to the Xavier-Briggs people?"

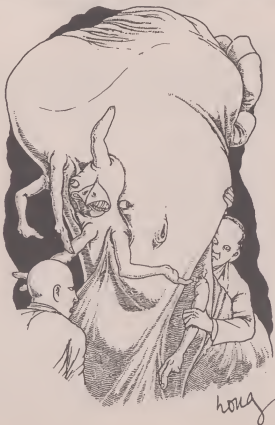
It was the man with the Jersey accent. I was sure he was a man, now, after his touch. I did not scream. I did not cause a scene. I did not even get very angry. I just knew, then, that it was time to talk with them, time to start my work. In his abayah and burnoose, the man looked like a medieval monk waiting to receive my confession. But I had nothing to confess, except that I was tired: very, very tired of working for something that would never be. The world would all change now, and I would help mold that change. That was my choice. I did not know what my mother would have thought of my decision. But I was younger than her, and maybe different from her after all, because I was voting again — I realized that now — I was voting in the new world I would help to be born.

I sat up straight, threw back the hood of my chador, pulled off my goggles (I'd forgotten to do all that again, once inside), and spoke to the man. "Wait for me outside," I said. "I want to look at these paintings. Then I will go with you to talk to your people."

I tried not to imagine him smiling in the shadows of his burnoose.

I looked away and imagined, instead, the *Sphenisciformes nocturnal* that would come, the nocturnal penguins, with their large owl eyes and their thick lids, waking at dusk to tumble into a dark sea. There they would feed on UV-resistant krill I would develop, if I could, and if not krill, something. I would find something to change for them so they could eat in the blackness of their new world.

I took my place in line and went with Savka and Aruthin and Yegor to look at Constable's *The Hay-Wain* and *The Grove at Hampstead* and the soft sunlight in those paintings. We walked along past the works of so many other landscape artists, and somewhere between Frederick Church's *Heart of the Andes*, with its sumptuous trees, and Van Gogh's *A Cornfield, with Cypresses*, I opened my *Time* to the article on Antarctica and looked at each photograph. In years to come, the photographs from Antarctica would look very different. These had no penguins. ☞



"Doodling, Sturgis, has no place in bioengineering."



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# FILMS

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KATHI MAIO

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## A TREK...AND A JOURNEY REALLY WORTH TAKING

**T**HEY AIN'T kiddin' when they say "resistance is futile." When it

comes to the *Star Trek* empire, you can run, but you can't hide. For thirty years, the cast and stories have mutated and spread throughout the broadcast channels of television and (for nigh on twenty years) across the silver screens throughout this fragile planet. They call it, quite frankly, a "franchise." And like the golden arches, the commercial success and social reach of this phenomenon is amazing. And, yes, for some of us, a little frightening.

Like the Borg, the *Star Trek* empire would like to assimilate all who come in contact with it. But I have, in some improbable Picardian manner, somehow kept hold of a secret store of resistance to its power. (For me, the oft-satiric cultural references to the *Trek* world

— like Tom Rush singing Jake Holmes's loser's lament, "Beam Me Up Scotty" — have always been much more entertaining than any *Enterprise* adventure you could name.)

Still, I do understand *Star Trek's* appeal of the predictable. All soap operas comfort us with the very familiarity of their characters and storylines. We come to each episode, or go to each movie, more or less knowing how the cast is going to act and what kinds of things they're going to say. We know what kinds of situations our old friends are going to get into. And we have a good idea how they're going to extricate themselves from each new, potentially Earth-shattering crisis. (If they're series regulars, that is. Woe to the unfamiliar face on the flight deck—those poor souls are not long for this world...or any other.)

Old friends are so hard to part

with that many were sad to see the total transfer of power from the original *Enterprise* crew to that of the Next Generation for *Star Trek: First Contact*. Personally, I had mixed feelings about the changeover. The acting was certainly far from great in that first series and in the six movies that followed it. (But, hey, that's part of the sf tradition. Buster Crabbe wasn't exactly Royal National Theatre material, either.) In fairness, though, that original multicultural cast of B-actors had a tendency to grow on you. Especially as they grew old. And the very longevity of the original *Trek* cast ended up making a very positive social statement. In a world where ageism often cuts short a productive worklife, it was important to see those graying, wrinkled, rotund characters continue to play the heroes, succeeding at important work (like preserving Life As We Know It).

And yet, there's no mistaking that the quality of the acting, the special effects, and the general production values of *Star Trek* have advanced a notch or two in *Star Trek: First Contact*. And I would agree that this latest movie is one of the better products of the franchise. Is this more evidence for "the even-number theory" (that only the even-

numbered big screen outings of the *Enterprise* — movies 2, 4, 6 and 8 — are worthwhile)? Perhaps. It does, at least, show, that in a distinctly checkered history, any critical reports of the imminent demise of this movie series have been greatly exaggerated.

Yes, *Star Trek: First Contact* is, indeed, a top-of-the-line *Star Trek*. But that doesn't make it a good film. The writing (by *Trek* vets Brannon Braga and Ronald D. Moore, under the guidance of producer/guru Rick Berman) is too full of jargon and screwball logic, as per usual. And, as always, a full understanding of the involved story and large cast of characters requires the audience to have full knowledge of *Star Trek's* epic backstory. And although the direction, by Number One, Jonathan Frakes, is energetic enough to keep one's interest, it is derivative of every sf-actioner you ever saw.

Which is one of my major problems with *First Contact*. It is a pale imitation (although with spiffier crew costumes) of *Alien*. And, really, it's not much better than the scores of other *Alien* rip-offs that have been produced in the last sixteen years. Monsters want to take over human life forms...yadda...yadda...yadda. Ill-fated crew

members scream at monsters which aren't half as scary as Giger's original *Alien* critters. (They are *Night of the Living Dead* ghouls with funny electronic monocles. Or, a more pasty-faced version of 1992's *Universal Soldier*.) Still, we're supposed to anxiously ask ourselves: Will the Borg take over the ship?

After seeing the pale, moist majesty of the Borg queen, played with witty sensuality by Alice Krige, I began to hope so. She is by far and away the most intriguing character in the movie. But we get to spend far too little time with her, because the writers want to give you story overload by combining this 24th-century alien ship invasion with another parallel plot. This one features those same Borg villains trying to time-travel back to the 21st century in order to take over Earth by first sabotaging a pivotal meeting between good extraterrestrials (those cool, collected, Christ-like Vulcans) and the inventor of warp-speed travel, Zefram Cochrane.

Cochrane is played by James Cromwell, of *Babe* fame (and prior *Trek* series experience), quite nicely. But I found this particular subplot fairly dull. Cochrane's character is completely defined by his drunkenness and his inexplicable taste for what — even today — is vintage

rock'n'roll. (Yeah, it's kinda cute, but isn't Cochrane's profound love for Steppenwolf as absurd as the idea that Shannon Lucid might have needed Stephen Foster tunes to get her through those long nights on Mir?) But so what if the rock bits are absurd? They aren't really meant to assist in character development. They are merely a nod to formative culture of the (rapidly aging) original Trekkers, the acknowledged core audience for this and every other *Star Trek* film.

If James Cromwell wasted his talents on this one, he was not alone. Marina Sirtis (Troi) and LeVar Burton (Geordi), key members of the Earth-plot away team, were given short shrift. Like Gates McFadden's Crusher back on the *Enterprise*, they spout a few poorly written lines in a mere handful of scenes. Glorified walk-ons, they are.

Which is too often the case with this series. With such a large cast, which includes guest stars and a few crossovers from other *Trek* series as well as all those *Next Generation* regulars, there just isn't time for much character exposition. Data (Brent Spiner) has a good scene or two when he is captured by the Borgs. But, as always, it's the Captain who makes out best. Picard's own nightmarish memories of the



time he was almost assimilated by the Borgs provide the emotional fuel for his hand-to-hand war with the robotically-boring baddie legions.

(Clearly, Picard is a member of some master race. It takes a long, drawn-out Perils of Picard scene at the hands of the Borg Queen to try (and fail) to assimilate the Captain for the second time. Most of the luckless *Enterprise* extras convert at the mere touch of a drone. Seconds later, they're sprouting metal tubes and electronic eye-pieces!)

Luckily, no matter how preposterous the plot, Patrick Stewart remains an interesting actor to watch. A bit too lah-dee-dah for my taste, but a performer who is capable of layering the performance of even half-baked lines like the ones that fill *First Contact*. Picard's scenes with the bewildered but brave Lily Sloane (Alfre Woodard), Cochrane's partner from the 21st century, made the movie worth watching for me.

Lily accuses Picard of playing Ahab when he declares the need to draw the line "hey-ah," and continue his seemingly hopeless battle with the Borg on board. The vengeful obsession angle was a bit obvious, but with actors as skilled as Stewart and Woodard, I barely noticed.

I did notice, however, a fairly

blatant attempt to macho-ize Picard. I always liked the cerebral-sensitive-guy aspect of Picard's leadership style. He was a thinking person's hero (which is why he was an even bigger hit with women than the cocky Captain Kirk). But, in *First Contact*, he growls and yells and marches around with guns a lot. And, in case you miss the tough guy angle, Picard even takes time out for a shoot-out with his foe in the middle of a holographic novel, in which he plays a hard-boiled shamus capable of exterminating real monster Borgs with the firepower of an imaginary tommy gun.(?!)

By the end of *First Contact* Picard is stripped down for action like a Stallone wannabe, swinging from cables, biceps bulging. He even gets to snap the neck of the Borg Queen with his bare hands. Is this progress? Or, does this mean that Picard is becoming just an ordinary (and utterly offensive) Hollywood action hero?

Picard takes pride in telling Lily Sloane about human progress away from a capitalist mentality toward a nonprofit-based work ethic "to better ourselves and the rest of humanity." But Picard and his crew aren't noticeably more noble than their 21st-century brethren. They interfere with history in a most

cavalier fashion. They shoot first, and ask questions later. Come to think of it, they're no better than the cowboys and soldiers and tough guys of a thousand movies that came before *Star Trek: First Contact*.

So, if the folks aboard the *Enterprise* are your old friends, I wish you joy of them. I'm sure that you had a high old time hangin' with them once more. But I'll freely admit that these are not *my* bosom buddies. They are only vague acquaintances whom I tend to judge by their current actions and attitudes, and not by sentimental remembrance. Likewise, I can only judge the movie they populate simply as a feature film, against the standard of other good movies I've seen before. By such criteria, *First Contact* comes up short. Way short.

A better-than-average *Star Trek* movie turns out to be just a so-so flick.

But I recently saw another movie that suited my tastes much better. I don't really need an elaborately wrought Hollywood fantasy where actors wearing five-hour makeup jobs and carrying an assortment of fancy gadgets babble insider-gibberish at one another. I much prefer my fantasies to be grounded in my own reality — to feel a little closer to home.

And you can't get much closer to home than your own back yard.

*Microcosmos* is a nature documentary, made in France, that observes, with wonder, the secret world "almost beneath our notice." That world is one inhabited by fantastical creatures who crawl and soar, love and toil, fight and die, in the green meadows of this Earth. They are insects. And, as photographed (patiently and ingeniously) by biologist/filmmakers Claude Nuridsany and Marie Perennou, they make fascinating stars of the silver screen.

The two directors invested more than fifteen years preparing for a film that took them three years to shoot. They actually needed to perfect audio and cinematic techniques that would allow them to get up close and personal with their cast of thousands. The resulting sound track, interspersed with Bruno Coulais's score (complete with arias, angelic choirs, and symphonic flourishes), consists of the sounds of nature. And the look of nature is astounding, when you are able to closely observe the fearsome beauty of a spider wrapping its prey in silk, or minutely study the intricate pattern of a gossamer wing.

Obviously, insect documentaries have been done before, but never

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with this much care and artistry. And unlike your average program on "The Penguin Channel" or PBS, there is very little overt human presence in *Microcosmos*. Except for a short bit of poetical narration at the film's beginning and end (intoned by Kristin Scott Thomas), there is no human voice-over.

This will cause some viewers considerable frustration, of course. (I know, at times, it did me.) We are used to nature documentaries being rather dry educational opportunities. Lots of explanations and descriptions are always provided us. We learn the names (often in Latin) of every creature we see, and then some naturalist tells us why (he thinks) a certain bug is performing the particular behavior we are watching.

This is not at all the approach Nuridsany and Perennou take. They don't impose their own analysis on the actions of their characters. They don't even identify the creatures they help us observe. They just let the resplendence of day-in-the-life-of-a-summer-meadow play out in its own terms. They invite us to surrender ourselves to the majesty of this "planet below the planet." (And although I'm very glad that the filmmakers took the approach they did, a companion book, or CD-ROM, with mug shots of the play-

ers and scientific text explaining the action of the film, would be a great boon to *Nature*-trained viewers who wish for education as well as entertainment spectacle.)

Now, you don't need to remind me that *Microcosmos* is not a science fiction film. But if you try to tell me it's not fantasy, I'll tell you that you have a far too limited view of things. This is fantasy based in strange reality. *Microcosmos* takes you on a journey into a magical realm populated by fantastical inhabitants intent on mysterious rituals.

The "plot," it's true, is a tad disjointed. But all the elements of a rip-roaring story are here. For action fans, there are two stag beetles doing heroic battle with one another. And for those who enjoy a touch of horrific violence, there's the pheasant who massacres an industrious colony of ants. For pathos (with slapstick overtones), you can watch a determined scarab beetle pursue its Sisyphean goal of pushing its dung "pill" up the slopes of a dirt track. For a hint of the bizarre, consider the argyronet spider who lives underwater and gathers air bubbles to build a "diving bell" chamber, the better to feast on a tasty freshwater shrimp. And for those who think a movie's not a movie without an obligatory sex

scene, two burgundy snails do the nasty before your very eyes.

You know, one of the things that's always bothered me about most futuristic tales about "aliens" and Earthlings interacting is the human arrogance such stories tend to exhibit. The *Star Trek* movies are no exception to this rule. We are told, in *First Contact*, that Cochrane's first warp flight was a key historical event because it proved to the superior races from other worlds that although Earth folks were backward, they weren't so primitive as to be beneath contempt or association.

Fine, then why are dummies from Earth always the big-cheese heroes of *Trek* adventures, and the captains of every battle-winning ship? In *First Contact*, Borg "assimilation" is seen as absolute evil. (So much so that it is a heroic act for a human Captain and his own cyborg "drone" to slaughter the Borg queen and eradicate her race.) And yet, it is viewed as a good thing for humans to perform their own — slightly more subtle — forms of assimilation of aliens during *Star Trek* missions. And it is a natural, normal occurrence for *Trek* crews to place the protection of Earth's interests above the needs of any other culture.

Clearly, developmentally challenged or not, humans consider themselves the Big Kahuna tribe of the universe. We need to be in the driver's seat of life. And we claim the right to impose our will on all other creatures.

As we all know, the tribes of the "other worlds" right here on Earth have suffered mightily from the intolerance and master-race arrogance of humans. The insect world included. We consider "bugs" to be pests at best. Monsters, at worst. We spend little time trying to understand them. We prefer to declare ourselves masters of these billions of Earth brethren and to kill them, without compunction, when we're in the mood.

But, watching *Microcosmos*, and all of its splendor in the grass, you realize how foolish it is for us to think of this as our planet. In their parallel universe, right outside our door, insects are not at all impressed by the self-importance of our race. In fact, as they lead their own (short) lives, and have their own (minuscule) adventures, none of them give us a second thought.

It's a humbling realization.

And that's a good thing. *Homo sapiens* need to acquire a little more humility before the real Vulcans show up in a nearby cow pasture. ☞

*Brian Stableford's recent novels include The Carnival of Destruction and Serpent's Blood. In this fascinating story, he blends an ancient Greek myth with a more recent British fantasy to produce a future in which children never grow up...until, of course, it all goes wrong.*

# The Pipes of Pan

*By Brian Stableford*

**I**N HER DREAM WENDY WAS a pretty little girl living wild in a magical wood where it never rained and never got cold. She lived on sweet berries of many colors, which always tasted wonderful, and all she wanted or needed was to be happy.

There were other girls living wild in the dream-wood but they all avoided one another, because they had no need of company. They had lived there, untroubled, for a long time — far longer than Wendy could remember.

Then, in the dream, the others came: the shadow-men with horns on their brows and shaggy legs. They played strange music on sets of pipes which looked as if they had been made from reeds — but Wendy knew, without knowing how she knew or what sense there was in it, that those pipes had been fashioned out of the blood and bones of something just like her, and that the music they played was the breath of her soul.

After the shadow-men came, the dream became steadily more night-

marish, and living wild ceased to be innocently joyful. After the shadow-men came, life was all hiding with a fearful, fluttering heart, knowing that if ever she were found she would have to run and run and run, without any hope of escape — but wherever she hid, she could always hear the music of the pipes.

When she woke up in a cold sweat, she wondered whether the dreams her parents had were as terrible, or as easy to understand. Somehow, she doubted it.

There was a sharp rat-a-tat on her bedroom door.

"Time to get up, Beauty." Mother didn't bother coming in to check that Wendy responded. Wendy always responded. She was a good girl.

She climbed out of bed, took off her night-dress, and went to sit at the dressing-table, to look at herself in the mirror. It had become part of her morning ritual, now that her awakenings were indeed awakenings. She blinked to clear the sleep from her eyes, shivering slightly as an image left over from the dream flashed briefly and threateningly in the depths of her emergent consciousness.

Wendy didn't know how long she had been dreaming. The dreams had begun before she developed the sense of time which would have allowed her to make the calculation. Perhaps she had always dreamed, just as she had always got up in the morning in response to the summoning rat-a-tat, but she had only recently come by the ability to remember her dreams. On the other hand, perhaps the beginning of her dreams had been the end of her innocence.

She often wondered how she had managed not to give herself away in the first few months, after she first began to remember her dreams but before she attained her present level of waking self-control, but any anomalies in her behavior must have been written off to the randomizing factor. Her parents were always telling her how lucky she was to be thirteen, and now she was in a position to agree with them. At thirteen, it was entirely appropriate to be a little bit inquisitive and more than a little bit odd. It was even possible to get away with being too clever by half, as long as she didn't overdo it.

It was difficult to be sure, because she didn't dare interrogate the house's systems too explicitly, but she had figured out that she must have



been thirteen for about thirty years, in mind and body alike. She was thirteen in her blood and her bones, but not in the privacy of her head.

Inside, where it counted, she had now been unthirteen for at least four months.

*If it would only stay inside, she thought, I might keep it a secret forever. But it won't. It isn't. It's coming out. Every day that passes is one day closer to the moment of truth.*

She stared into the mirror, searching the lines of her face for signs of maturity. She was sure that her face looked thinner, her eyes more serious, her hair less blonde. All of that might be mostly imagination, she knew, but there was no doubt about the other things. She was half an inch taller, and her breasts were getting larger. It was only a matter of time before that sort of thing attracted attention, and as soon as it was noticed the truth would be manifest. Measurements couldn't lie. As soon as they were moved to measure her, her parents would know the horrid truth.

Their baby was growing up.

"Did you sleep well, dear?" Mother said, as Wendy took her seat at the breakfast-table. It wasn't a trick question; it was just part of the routine. It wasn't even a matter of pretending, although her parents certainly did their fair share of that. It was just a way of starting the day off. Such rituals were part and parcel of what they thought of as *everyday life*. Parents had their innate programming too.

"Yes thank you," she replied, meekly.

"What flavor manna would you like today?"

"Coconut and strawberry please." Wendy smiled as she spoke, and Mother smiled back. Mother was smiling because Wendy was smiling. Wendy was supposed to be smiling because she was a smiley child, but in fact she was smiling because saying "strawberry and coconut" was an authentic and honest *choice*, an exercise of freedom which would pass as an expected manifestation of the randomizing factor.

"I'm afraid I can't take you out this morning, Lovely," Father said, while Mother punched out the order. "We have to wait in for the house-doctor. The waterworks still aren't right."

"If you ask me," Mother said, "the real problem's the water table. The taproots are doing their best but they're having to go down too far. The

system's fine just so long as we get some good old-fashioned rain once in a while, but every time there's a dry spell the whole estate suffers. We ought to call a meeting and put some pressure on the landscape engineers. Fixing a water table shouldn't be too much trouble in this day and age."

"There's nothing wrong with the water table, dear," Father said, patiently. "It's just that the neighbors have the same indwelling systems that we have. There's a congenital weakness in the root-system; in dry weather the cell-terminal conduits in the phloem tend to get gummed up. It ought to be easy enough to fix — a little elementary somatic engineering, probably no more than a single-gene augment in the phloem — but you know what doctors are like; they never want to go for the cheap and cheerful cure if they can sell you something more complicated."

"What's phloem?" Wendy asked. She could ask as many questions as she liked, to a moderately high level of sophistication. That was a great blessing. She was glad she wasn't an eight-year-old, reliant on passive observation and a restricted vocabulary. At least a thirteen-year-old had the right equipment for thinking all set up.

"It's a kind of plant tissue," Father informed her, ignoring the tight-lipped look Mother was giving him because he'd contradicted her. "It's sort of equivalent to your veins, except of course that plants have sap instead of blood."

Wendy nodded, but contrived to look as if she hadn't really understood the answer.

"I'll set the encyclopedia up on the system," Father said. "You can read all about it while I'm talking to the house-doctor."

"She doesn't want to spend the morning reading what the encyclopedia has to say about phloem," Mother said, peevishly. "She needs to get out into the fresh air." That wasn't mere ritual, like asking whether she had slept well, but it wasn't pretense either. When Mother started talking about Wendy's supposed wants and needs she was usually talking about her own wants and supposed needs. Wendy had come to realize that talking that way was Mother's preferred method of criticizing Father; she was paying him back for disagreeing about the water table.

Wendy was fully conscious of the irony of the fact that she really did want to study the encyclopedia. There was so much to learn and so little time. Maybe she didn't *need* to do it, given that it was unlikely to make

any difference in the long run, but she wanted to understand as much as she could before all the pretense had to end and the nightmare of uncertainty had to begin.

"It's okay, Mummy," she said. "Honest." She smiled at them both, attempting to bring off the delicate trick of pleasing Father by taking his side while simultaneously pleasing Mother by pretending to be as heroically long-suffering as Mother liked to consider herself.

They both smiled back. All was well, for now. Even though they listened to the news every night, they didn't seem to have the least suspicion that it could all be happening in their own home, to their own daughter.

IT ONLY TOOK a few minutes for Wendy to work out a plausible path of icon selection which got her away from translocation in plants and deep into the heart of child physiology. Father had set that up for her by comparing phloem to her own circulatory system. There was a certain danger in getting into recent reportage regarding childhood diseases, but she figured that she could explain it well enough if anyone took the trouble to consult the log to see what she'd been doing. She didn't think anyone was likely to, but she simply couldn't help being anxious about the possibility — there were, it seemed, a lot of things one simply couldn't help being anxious about, once it was possible to be anxious at all.

"I wondered if I could get sick like the house's roots," she would say, if asked. "I wanted to know whether my blood could get clogged up in dry weather." She figured that she would be okay as long as she pretended not to have understood what she'd read, and conscientiously avoided any mention of the word *progeria*. She already knew that *progeria* was what she'd got, and the last thing she wanted was to be taken to a child-engineer who'd be able to confirm the fact.

She called up a lot of innocuous stuff about blood, and spent the bulk of her time pretending to study elementary material of no real significance. Every time she got hold of a document she really wanted to look at she was careful to move on quickly, so it would seem as if she hadn't even bothered to look at it if anyone did consult the log to see what she'd been doing. She didn't dare call up any extensive current affairs information on

the progress of the plague or the fierce medical and political arguments concerning the treatment of its victims.

*It must be wonderful to be a parent, she thought, and not have to worry about being found out — or about anything at all, really.*

At first, Wendy had thought that Mother and Father really did have worries, because they talked as if they did, but in the last few weeks she had begun to see through the sham. In a way, they *thought* that they did have worries, but it was all just a matter of habit, a kind of innate restlessness left over from the olden days. Adults must have had authentic anxieties at one time, back in the days when everybody could expect to die young and a lot of people never even reached seventy, and she presumed that they hadn't quite got used to the fact that they'd changed the world and changed themselves. They just hadn't managed to lose the habit. They probably would, in the fullness of time. Would they still need children then, she wondered, or would they learn to do without? Were children just another habit, another manifestation of innate restlessness? Had the great plague come just in time to seal off the redundant umbilical cord which connected mankind to its evolutionary past?

*We're just betwixts and between, Wendy thought, as she rapidly scanned a second-hand summary of a paper in the latest issue of Nature which dealt with the pathology of progeria. There'll soon be no place for us, whether we grow older or not. They'll get rid of us all.*

The article which contained the summary claimed that the development of an immunoserum was just a matter of time, although it wasn't yet clear whether anything much might be done to reverse the aging process in children who'd already come down with it. She didn't dare access the paper itself, or even an abstract — that would have been a dead giveaway, like leaving a bloody thumbprint at the scene of a murder.

Wendy wished that she had a clearer idea of whether the latest news was good or bad, or whether the long-term prospects had any possible relevance to her now that she had started to show physical symptoms as well as mental ones. She didn't know what would happen to her once Mother and Father found out and notified the authorities; there was no clear pattern in the stories she glimpsed in the general news-broadcasts, but whether this meant that there was as yet no coherent social policy for dealing with the rapidly escalating problem she wasn't sure.

For the thousandth time she wondered whether she ought simply to tell her parents what was happening, and for the thousandth time, she felt the terror growing within her at the thought that everything she had might be placed in jeopardy, that she might be sent back to the factory or handed over to the researchers or simply cut adrift to look after herself. There was no way of knowing, after all, what really lay behind the rituals which her parents used in dealing with her, no way of knowing what would happen when their thirteen-year-old daughter was no longer thirteen.

*Not yet, her fear said. Not yet. Hang on. Lie low...because once you can't hide, you'll have to run and run and run and there'll be nowhere to go. Nowhere at all.*

She left the workstation and went to watch the house-doctor messing about in the cellar. Father didn't seem very glad to see her, perhaps because he was trying to talk the house-doctor round to his way of thinking and didn't like the way the house-doctor immediately started talking to her instead of him, so she went away again, and played with her toys for a while. She still enjoyed playing with her toys — which was perhaps as well, all things considered.

"We can go out for a while now," Father said, when the house-doctor had finally gone. "Would you like to play ball on the back lawn?"

"Yes please," she said.

Father liked playing ball, and Wendy didn't mind. It was better than the sedentary pursuits which Mother preferred. Father had more energy to spare than Mother, probably because Mother had a job that was more taxing physically. Father only played with software; his clever fingers did all his work. Mother actually had to get her hands inside her remote-gloves and her feet inside her big red boots and get things moving. "Being a ghost in a machine," she would often complain, when she thought Wendy couldn't hear, "can be bloody hard work." She never swore in front of Wendy, of course.

Out on the back lawn, Wendy and Father threw the ball back and forth for half an hour, making the catches more difficult as time went by, so that they could leap about and dive on the bone-dry carpet-grass and get thoroughly dusty.

To begin with, Wendy was distracted by the ceaseless stream of her

insistent thoughts, but as she got more involved in the game she was able to let herself go a little. She couldn't quite get back to being thirteen, but she could get to a state of mind which wasn't quite so fearful. By the time her heart was pounding and she'd grazed both her knees and one of her elbows she was enjoying herself thoroughly, all the more so because Father was evidently having a good time. He was in a good mood anyhow, because the house-doctor had obligingly confirmed everything he'd said about the normality of the water-table, and had then backed down gracefully when he saw that he couldn't persuade Father that the house needed a whole new root-system.

"Those somatic transformations don't always take," the house-doctor had said, darkly but half-heartedly, as he left. "You might have trouble again, three months down the line."

"I'll take the chance," Father had replied, breezily. "Thanks for your time."

Given that the doctor was charging for his time, Wendy had thought, it should have been the doctor thanking Father, but she hadn't said anything. She already understood that kind of thing well enough not to have to ask questions about it. She had other matters she wanted to raise once Father collapsed on the baked earth, felled by healthy exhaustion, and demanded that they take a rest.

"I'm not as young as you are," he told her, jokingly. "When you get past a hundred and fifty you just can't take it the way you used to." He had no idea how it affected her to hear him say *you* in that careless fashion, when he really meant *we*: a *we* which didn't include her and never would.

"I'm bleeding," she said, pointing to a slight scratch on her elbow.

"Oh dear," he said. "Does it hurt?"

"Not much," she said, truthfully. "If too much leaks out, will I need injections, like the house's roots?"

"It won't come to that," he assured her, lifting up her arm so that he could put on a show of inspecting the wound. "It's just a drop. I'll kiss it better." He put his lips to the wound for a few seconds, then said: "It'll be as good as new in the morning."

"Good," she said. "I expect it'd be very expensive to have to get a whole new girl."

He looked at her a little strangely, but it seemed to Wendy that he was in such a light mood that he was in no danger of taking it too seriously.

"Fearfully expensive," he agreed, cheerfully, as he lifted her up in his arms and carried her back to the house. "We'll just have to take very good care of you, won't we?"

"Or do a somatic whatever," she said, as innocently as she possibly could. "Is that what you'd have to do if you wanted a boy for a while?"

He laughed, and there appeared to be no more than the merest trace of unease in his laugh. "We love you just the way you are, Lovely," he assured her. "We wouldn't want you to be any other way."

She knew that it was true. That was the problem.

She had ham and cheese manna for lunch, with real greens home-grown in the warm cellar-annex under soft red lights. She would have eaten heartily had she not been so desperately anxious about her weight, but as things were she felt it better to peck and pretend, and she surreptitiously discarded the food she hadn't consumed as soon as Father's back was turned.



**A**FTER LUNCH, judging it to be safe enough, she picked up the thread of the conversation again. "Why did you want a girl and not a boy?" she asked. "The Johnsons wanted a boy." The Johnsons had a ten-year-old named Peter. He was the only other child Wendy saw regularly, and he had not as yet exhibited the slightest sign of disease to her eager eye.

"We didn't want a girl," Father told her, tolerantly. "We wanted you."

"Why?" she asked, trying to look as if she were just fishing for compliments, but hoping to trigger something a trifle more revealing. This, after all, was *the* great mystery. Why her? Why anyone? Why did adults think they needed children?

"Because you're beautiful," Father said. "And because you're Wendy. Some people are Peter people, so they have Peters. Some people are Wendy people, so they have Wendys. Your Mummy and I are definitely Wendy people — probably the Wendiest people in the world. It's a matter of taste."

It was all baby-talk, all gobbledygook, but she felt that she had to keep trying. Some day, surely, one of them would let a little truth show

through their empty explanations.

"But you have different kinds of manna for breakfast, lunch and dinner," Wendy said, "and sometimes you go right off one kind for weeks on end. Maybe some day you'll go off me, and want a different one."

"No we won't, darling," he answered, gently. "There are matters of taste and matters of taste. Manna is fuel for the body. Variety of taste just helps to make the routine of eating that little bit more interesting. Relationships are something else. It's a different kind of need. We love you, Beauty, more than anything else in the world. Nothing could ever replace you."

She thought about asking about what would happen if Father and Mother ever got divorced, but decided that it would be safer to leave the matter alone for now. Even though time was pressing, she had to be careful.

They watched TV for a while before Mother came home. Father had a particular fondness for archive film of extinct animals — not the ones which the engineers had re-created but smaller and odder ones: weirdly shaped sea-dwelling creatures. He could never have seen such creatures even if they had still existed when he was young, not even in an aquarium, they had only ever been known to people as things on film. Even so, the whole tone of the tapes which documented their one-time existence was nostalgic, and Father seemed genuinely affected by a sense of personal loss at the thought of the sterilization of the seas during the last ecocatastrophe but one.

"Isn't it beautiful?" he said, of an excessively tentacled sea anemone which sheltered three vivid clown-fish while ungainly shrimps passed by. "Isn't it just *extraordinary*?"

"Yes," she said, dutifully, trying to inject an appropriate reverence into her tone. "It's lovely." The music on the sound-track was plaintive; it was being played on some fluty wind-instrument, possibly by a human player. Wendy had never heard music like it except on TV sound-tracks; it was as if the sound were the breath of the long-lost world of nature, teeming with undesigned life.

"Next summer," Father said, "I want us to go out in one of those glass-bottomed boats that take sight-seers out to the new barrier reef. It's not the



same as the original one, of course, and they're deliberately setting out to create something modern, something new, but they're stocking it with some truly weird and wonderful creatures."

"Mother wants to go up the Nile," Wendy said. "She wants to see the sphinx, and the tombs."

"We'll do that the year after," Father said. "They're just ruins. They can wait. Living things...." He stopped. "Look at those!" he said, pointing at the screen. She looked at a host of jellyfish swimming close to the silvery surface, their bodies pulsing like great translucent hearts.

*It doesn't matter, Wendy thought. I won't be there. I won't see the new barrier reef or the sphinx and the tombs. Even if they find a cure, and even if you both want me cured, I won't be there. Not the real me. The real me will have died, one way or another, and there'll be nothing left except a girl who'll be thirteen forever, and a randomizing factor which will make it seem that she has a lively mind.*

Father put his arm around her shoulder, and hugged her fondly.

Father must really love her very dearly, she thought. After all, he had loved her for thirty years, and might love her for thirty years more, if only she could stay the way she was...if only she could be returned to what she had been before....

The evening TV schedules advertised a documentary on progeria, scheduled for late at night, long after the nation's children had been put to bed. Wendy wondered if her parents would watch it, and whether she could sneak downstairs to listen to the sound-track through the closed door. In a way, she hoped that they wouldn't watch it. It might put ideas into their heads. It was better that they thought of the plague as a distant problem: something that could only affect other people; something with which they didn't need to concern themselves.

She stayed awake, just in case, and when the luminous dial of her bedside clock told her it was time she silently got up, and crept down the stairs until she could hear what was going on in the living room. It was risky, because the randomizing factor wasn't really supposed to stretch to things like that, but she'd done it before without being found out.

It didn't take long to ascertain that the TV wasn't even on, and that the only sound to be heard was her parents' voices. She actually turned

around to go back to bed before she suddenly realized what they were talking about.

"Are you *sure* she isn't affected mentally?" Mother was saying.

"Absolutely certain," Father replied. "I watched her all afternoon, and she's perfectly normal."

"Perhaps she hasn't got it at all," Mother said, hopefully.

"Maybe not the worst kind," Father said, in a voice that was curiously firm. "They're not sure that even the worst cases are manifesting authentic self-consciousness, and there's a strong contingent which argues that the vast majority of cases are relatively minor dislocations of programming. But there's no doubt about the physical symptoms. I picked her up to carry her indoors and she's a stone heavier. She's got hair growing in her armpits and she's got tangible tits. We'll have to be careful how we dress her when we take her to public places."

"Can we do anything about her food — reduce the calorific value of her manna or something?"

"Sure — but that'd be hard evidence if anyone audited the house records. Not that anyone's likely to, now that the doctor's been and gone, but you never know. I read an article which cites a paper in the latest *Nature* to demonstrate that a cure is just around the corner. If we can just hang on until then...she's a big girl anyhow, and she might not put on more than an inch or two. As long as she doesn't start behaving oddly, we might be able to keep it secret."

"If they do find out," said Mother, ominously, "there'll be hell to pay."

"I don't think so," Father assured her. "I've heard that the authorities are quite sympathetic in private, although they have to put on a sterner face for publicity purposes."

"I'm not talking about the bloody bureaucrats," Mother retorted, "I'm talking about the estate. If the neighbors find out we're sheltering a center of infection...well, how would you feel if the Johnsons' Peter turned out to have the disease and hadn't warned us about the danger to Wendy?"

"They're not certain how it spreads," said Father, defensively, "They don't know what kind of vector's involved — until they find out there's no reason to think that Wendy's endangering Peter just by living next

door. It's not as if they spend much time together. We can't lock her up — that'd be suspicious in itself. We have to pretend that things are absolutely normal, at least until we know how this thing is going to turn out. I'm not prepared to run the risk of their taking her away — not if there's the slightest chance of avoiding it. I don't care what they say on the newstapes — this thing is getting out of control and I really don't know how it's going to turn out. I'm not letting Wendy go anywhere, unless I'm absolutely forced. She may be getting heavier and hairier, but *inside* she's still Wendy, and *I'm not letting them take her away.*"

Wendy heard Father's voice getting louder as he came toward the door, and she scuttled back up the stairs as fast as she could go. Numb with shock, she climbed back into bed. Father's words echoed inside her head: "I watched her all afternoon and she's perfectly normal...*inside* she's still Wendy...."

They were putting on an act too, and she hadn't known. She hadn't been able to tell. She'd been watching them, and they'd seemed perfectly normal...but *inside*, where it counted....

It was a long time before she fell asleep, and when she finally did, she dreamed of shadow-men and shadow-music, which drew the very soul from her even as she fled through the infinite forest of green and gold.

**T**HE MEN from the Ministry of Health arrived next morning, while Wendy was finishing her honey and almond manna. She saw Father go pale as the man in the gray suit held up his identification card to the door camera. She watched Father's lip trembling as he thought about telling the man in the gray suit that he couldn't come in, and then realized that it wouldn't do any good. As Father got up to go to the door he exchanged a bitter glance with Mother, and murmured: "That bastard house-doctor."

Mother came to stand behind Wendy, and put both of her hands on Wendy's shoulders. "It's all right, darling," she said. Which meant, all too clearly, that things were badly wrong.

Father and the man in the gray suit were already arguing as they came through the door. There was another man behind them, dressed in less formal clothing. He was carrying a heavy black bag, like a rigid suitcase.

"I'm sorry," the man in the gray suit was saying. "I understand your

feelings, but this is an epidemic — a national emergency. We have to check out all reports, and we have to move swiftly if we're to have any chance of containing the problem."

"If there'd been any cause for alarm," Father told him, hotly, "I'd have called you myself." But the man in the gray suit ignored him; from the moment he had entered the room his eyes had been fixed on Wendy. He was smiling. Even though Wendy had never seen him before and didn't know the first thing about him, she knew that the smile was dangerous.

"Hello, Wendy," said the man in the gray suit, smoothly. "My name's Tom Cartwright. I'm from the Ministry of Health. This is Jimmy Li. I'm afraid we have to carry out some tests."

Wendy stared back at him as blankly as she could. In a situation like this, she figured, it was best to play dumb, at least to begin with.

"You can't do this," Mother said, gripping Wendy's shoulders just a little too hard. "You can't take her away."

"We can complete our initial investigation here and now," Cartwright answered, blandly. "Jimmy can plug into your kitchen systems, and I can do my part right here at the table. It'll be over in less than half an hour, and if all's well we'll be gone in no time." The way he said it implied that he didn't really expect to be gone in no time.

Mother and Father blustered a little more, but it was only a gesture. They knew how futile it all was. While Mr. Li opened up his bag of tricks to reveal an awesome profusion of gadgets forged in metal and polished glass Father came to stand beside Wendy, and like Mother he reached out to touch her.

They both assured her that the needle Mr. Li was preparing wouldn't hurt when he put it into her arm, and when it did hurt — bringing tears to her eyes in spite of her efforts to blink them away — they told her the pain would go away in a minute. It didn't, of course. Then they told her not to worry about the questions Mr. Cartwright was going to ask her, although it was as plain as the noses on their faces that they were terrified by the possibility that she would give the wrong answers.

In the end, though, Wendy's parents had to step back a little, and let her face up to the man from the Ministry on her own.

*I mustn't play too dumb, Wendy thought. That would be just as much of a giveaway as being too clever. I have to try to make my mind*

*blank, let the answers come straight out without thinking at all. It ought to be easy. After all, I've been thirteen for thirty years, and unthirteen for a matter of months...it should be easy.*

She knew that she was lying to herself. She knew well enough that she had crossed a boundary that couldn't be re-crossed just by stepping backward.

"How old are you, Wendy?" Cartwright asked, when Jimmy Li had vanished into the kitchen to play with her blood.

"Thirteen," she said, trying to return his practiced smile without too much evident anxiety.

"Do you know *what* you are, Wendy?"

"I'm a girl," she answered, knowing that it wouldn't wash.

"Do you know what the difference between children and adults is, Wendy? Apart from the fact that they're smaller."

There was no point in denying it. At thirteen, a certain amount of self-knowledge was included in the package, and even thirteen-year-olds who never looked at an encyclopedia learned quite a lot about the world and its ways in the course of thirty years.

"Yes," she said, knowing full well that she wasn't going to be allowed to get away with minimal replies.

"Tell me what you know about the difference," he said.

"It's not such a big difference," she said, warily. "Children are made out of the same things adults are made of — but they're made so they stop growing at a certain age, and never get any older. Thirteen is the oldest — some stop at eight."

"Why are children made that way, Wendy?" Step by inexorable step he was leading her toward the deep water, and she didn't know how to swim. She knew that she wasn't clever enough — yet — to conceal her cleverness.

"Population control," she said.

"Can you give me a more detailed explanation, Wendy?"

"In the olden days," she said, "there were catastrophes. Lots of people died, because there were so many of them. They discovered how not to grow old, so that they could live for hundreds of years if they didn't get killed in bad accidents. They had to stop having so many children, or they wouldn't be able to feed everyone when the children kept growing up, but

they didn't want to have a world with no children in it. Lots of people still wanted children, and couldn't stop wanting them — and in the end, after more catastrophes, those people who really wanted children a lot were able to have them...only the children weren't allowed to grow up and have more children of their own. There were lots of arguments about it, but in the end things calmed down."

"There's another difference between children and adults, isn't there?" said Cartwright, smoothly.

"Yes," Wendy said, knowing that she was supposed to have that information in her memory and that she couldn't refuse to voice it. "Children can't think very much. They have *limited self-consciousness*." She tried hard to say it as though it were a mere formula, devoid of any real meaning so far as she was concerned.

"Do you know why children are made with limited self-consciousness?"

"No." She was sure that *no* was the right answer to that one, although she'd recently begun to make guesses. It was so they wouldn't know what was happening if they were ever sent back, and so that they didn't *change* too much as they learned things, becoming un-childlike in spite of their appearance.

"Do you know what the word *progeria* means, Wendy?"

"Yes," she said. Children watched the news. Thirteen-year-olds were supposed to be able to hold intelligent conversations with their parents. "It's when children get older even though they shouldn't. It's a disease that children get. It's happening a lot."

"Is it happening to you, Wendy? Have you got progeria?"

For a second or two she hesitated between *no* and *I don't know*, and then realized how bad the hesitation must look. She kept her face straight as she finally said: "I don't think so."

"What would you think if you found out you *had* got progeria, Wendy?" Cartwright asked, smug in the knowledge that she must be way out of her depth by now, whatever the truth of the matter might be.

"You can't ask her that!" Father said. "She's thirteen! Are you trying to scare her half to death? Children can be scared, you know. They're not robots."

"No," said Cartwright, without taking his eyes off Wendy's face. "They're not. Answer the question, Wendy."

"I wouldn't like it," Wendy said, in a low voice. "I don't want anything to happen to me. I want to be with Mummy and Daddy. I don't want anything to happen."

While she was speaking, Jimmy Li had come back into the room. He didn't say a word and his nod was almost imperceptible, but Tom Cartwright wasn't really in any doubt.

"I'm afraid it has, Wendy," he said, softly. "It *has* happened, as you know very well.

"No *she doesn't!*" said Mother, in a voice that was halfway to a scream. "She doesn't know any such thing!"

"It's a very mild case," Father said. "We've been watching her like hawks. It's purely physical. Her behavior hasn't altered at all. She isn't showing any mental symptoms whatsoever."

"You can't take her away," Mother said, keeping her shrillness under a tight rein. "We'll keep her in quarantine. We'll join one of the drug-trials. You can monitor her *but you can't take her away*. She doesn't understand what's happening. She's just a little girl. It's only slight, only her body."

Tom Cartwright let the storm blow out. He was still looking at Wendy, and his eyes seemed kind, full of concern. He let a moment's silence endure before he spoke to her again.

"Tell them, Wendy," he said, softly. "Explain to them that it isn't slight at all."

She looked up at Mother, and then at Father, knowing how much it would hurt them to be told. "I'm still Wendy," she said, faintly. "I'm still your little girl. I...."

She wanted to say *I always will be*, but she couldn't. She had always been a good girl, and some lies were simply too difficult to voice.

*I wish I was a randomizing factor*, she thought, fiercely wishing that it could be true, that it might be true. *I wish I was....*

Absurdly, she found herself wondering whether it would have been more grammatical to have thought *I wish I were...*

It was so absurd that she began to laugh, and then she began to cry, helplessly. It was almost as if the flood of tears could wash away the burden of thought — almost, but not quite.

Mother took her back into her bedroom, and sat with her, holding her hand. By the time the shuddering sobs released her — long after she had run out of tears — Wendy felt a new sense of grievance. Mother kept looking at the door, wishing that she could be out there, adding her voice to the argument, because she didn't really trust Father to get it right. The sense of duty which kept her pinned to Wendy's side was a burden, a burning frustration. Wendy didn't like that. Oddly enough, though, she didn't feel any particular resentment at being put out of the way while Father and the Ministry of Health haggled over her future. She understood well enough that she had no voice in the matter, no matter how unlimited her self-consciousness had now become, no matter what progressive leaps and bounds she had accomplished as the existential fetters had shattered and fallen away.

She was still a little girl, for the moment.

She was still Wendy, for the moment.

When she could speak, she said to Mother: "Can we have some music?"

Mother looked suitably surprised. "What kind of music?" she countered.

"Anything," Wendy said. The music she was hearing in her head was soft and fluty music, which she heard as if from a vast distance, and which somehow seemed to be the oldest music in the world, but she didn't particularly want it duplicated and brought into the room. She just wanted something to fill the cracks of silence which broke up the muffled sound of arguing.

Mother called up something much more liquid, much more upbeat, much more modern. Wendy could see that Mother wanted to speak to her, wanted to deluge her with reassurances, but couldn't bear to make any promises she wouldn't be able to keep. In the end, Mother contented herself with hugging Wendy to her bosom, as fiercely and as tenderly as she could.

When the door opened it flew back with a bang. Father came in first.

"It's all right," he said, quickly. "They're not going to take her away. They'll quarantine the house instead."

Wendy felt the tension in Mother's arms. Father could work entirely from home much more easily than Mother, but there was no way Mother was going to start protesting on those grounds. While quarantine wasn't



exactly *all right* it was better than she could have expected.

"It's not generosity, I'm afraid," said Tom Cartwright. "It's necessity. The epidemic is spreading too quickly. We don't have the facilities to take tens of thousands of children into state care. Even the quarantine will probably be a short-term measure — to be perfectly frank, it's a panic measure. The simple truth is that the disease can't be contained no matter what we do."

"How could you let this happen?" Mother said, in a low tone bristling with hostility. "How could you let it get this far out of control? With all modern technology at your disposal you surely should be able to put the brake on a simple virus."

"It's not so simple," Cartwright said, apologetically. "If it really had been a freak of nature — some stray strand of DNA which found a new ecological niche — we'd probably have been able to contain it easily. We don't believe that any more."

"It was *designed*," Father said, with the airy confidence of the well-informed — though even Wendy knew that this particular item of wisdom must have been news to him five minutes ago. "Somebody cooked this thing up in a lab and let it loose *deliberately*. It was all planned, in the name of liberation...in the name of chaos, if you ask me."

*Somebody did this to me!* Wendy thought. *Somebody actually set out to take away the limits, to turn the randomizing factor into...into what, exactly?*

While Wendy's mind was boggling, Mother was saying: "Who? How? Why?"

"You know how some people are," Cartwright said, with a fatalistic shrug of his shoulders. "Can't see an apple-cart without wanting to upset it. You'd think the chance to live for a thousand years would confer a measure of maturity even on the meanest intellect, but it hasn't worked out that way. Maybe someday we'll get past all that, but in the meantime..."

*Maybe someday,* Wendy thought, *all the things left over from the infancy of the world will go. All the crazinesses, all the disagreements, all the diehard habits.* She hadn't known that she was capable of being quite so sharp, but she felt perversely proud of the fact that she didn't have to spell out — even to herself, in the brand new arena of her private thoughts

— the fact that one of those symptoms of craziness, one of the focal points of those disagreements, and the most diehard of all those habits, was keeping children in a world where they no longer had any biological function — or, rather, keeping the ghosts of children, who weren't really children at all because they were *always* children.

"They call it liberation," Father was saying, "but it really is a disease, a terrible affliction. It's the destruction of *innocence*. It's a kind of mass murder." He was obviously pleased with his own eloquence, and with the righteousness of his wrath. He came over to the bed and plucked Wendy out of Mother's arms. "It's all right, Beauty," he said. "We're all in this together. We'll face it together. You're absolutely right. You're still our little girl. You're still Wendy. Nothing terrible is going to happen."

It was far better, in a way, than what she'd imagined — or had been too scared to imagine. There was a kind of relief in not having to pretend any more, in not having to keep the secret. That boundary had been crossed, and now there was no choice but to go forward.

*Why didn't I tell them before?* Wendy wondered. *Why didn't I just tell them, and trust them to see that everything would be all right?* But even as she thought it, even as she clutched at the straw, just as Mother and Father were clutching, she realized how hollow the thought was, and how meaningless Father's reassurances were. It was all just sentiment, and habit, and pretense. Everything couldn't and wouldn't be "all right," and never would be again, unless....

Turning to Tom Cartwright, warily and uneasily, she said: "Will I be an adult now? Will I live for a thousand years, and have my own house, my own job, my own...?"

She trailed off as she saw the expression in his eyes, realizing that she was still a little girl, and that there were a thousand questions adults couldn't and didn't want to hear, let alone try to answer.

It was late at night before Mother and Father got themselves into the right frame of mind for the kind of serious talk that the situation warranted, and by that time Wendy knew perfectly well that the honest answer to almost all the questions she wanted to ask was: "Nobody knows."

She asked the questions anyway. Mother and Father varied their

answers in the hope of appearing a little wiser than they were, but it all came down to the same thing in the end. It all came down to desperate pretense.

"We have to take it as it comes," Father told her. "It's an unprecedented situation. The government has to respond to the changes on a day-by-day basis. We can't tell how it will all turn out. It's a mess, but the world has been in a mess before — in fact, it's hardly ever been out of a mess for more than a few years at a time. We'll cope as best we can. *Everybody* will cope as best they can. With luck, it might not come to violence — to war, to slaughter, to ecocatastrophe. We're entitled to hope that we really are past all that now, that we really are capable of handling things *sensibly* this time."

"Yes," Wendy said, conscientiously keeping as much of the irony out of her voice as she could. "I understand. Maybe we won't just be sent back to the factories to be scrapped...and maybe if they find a cure, they'll ask us whether we want to be cured before they use it." *With luck*, she added, silently, *maybe we can all be adult about the situation.*

They both looked at her uneasily, not sure how to react. From now on, they would no longer be able to grin and shake their heads at the wondrous inventiveness of the randomizing factor in her programming. From now on, they would actually have to try to figure out what she *meant*, and what unspoken thoughts might lie behind the calculated wit and hypocrisy of her every statement. She had every sympathy for them; she had only recently learned for herself what a difficult, frustrating and thankless task that could be.

*This happened to their ancestors once*, she thought. *But not as quickly. Their ancestors didn't have the kind of head-start you can get by being thirteen for thirty years. It must have been hard, to be a thinking ape among unthinkers. Hard, but...well, they didn't ever want to give it up, did they?*

"Whatever happens, Beauty," Father said, "we love you. Whatever happens, you're our little girl. When you're grown up, we'll still love you the way we always have. We always will."

*He actually believes it*, Wendy thought. *He actually believes that the world can still be the same, in spite of everything. He can't let go of the hope that even though everything's changing, it will all be the same*

underneath. But it won't. Even if there isn't a resource crisis — after all, grown-up children can't eat much more than un-grown-up ones — the world can never be the same. This is the time in which the adults of the world have to get used to the fact that there can't be any more families, because from now on children will have to be rare and precious and strange. This is the time when the old people will have to recognize that the day of their silly stopgap solutions to imaginary problems is over. This is the time when we all have to grow up. If the old people can't do that by themselves, then the new generation will simply have to show them the way.

"I love you too," she answered, earnestly. She left it at that. There wasn't any point in adding: "I always have," or "I can mean it now," or any of the other things which would have underlined rather than assuaged the doubts they must be feeling.

"And we'll be all right," Mother said. "As long as we love one another, and as long as we face this thing together, we'll be all right."

*What a wonderful thing true innocence is,* Wendy thought, rejoicing in her ability to think such a thing freely, without shame or reservation. *I wonder if I'd be able to cultivate it, if I ever wanted to.*

**T**HAT NIGHT, bedtime was abolished. She was allowed to stay up as late as she wanted to. When she finally did go to bed she was so exhausted that she quickly drifted off into a deep and peaceful sleep — but she didn't remain there indefinitely. Eventually, she began to dream.

In her dream Wendy was living wild in a magical wood where it never rained. She lived on sweet berries of many colors. There were other girls living wild in the dream-wood but they all avoided one another. They had lived there for a long time but now the others had come: the shadow-men with horns on their brows and shaggy legs who played strange music, which was the breath of souls.

Wendy hid from the shadow-men, but the fearful fluttering of her heart gave her away, and one of the shadow-men found her. He stared down at her with huge baleful eyes, wiping spittle from his pipes onto his fleecy rump.

"Who are you?" she asked, trying to keep the tremor of fear out of her voice.

"I'm the devil," he said.

"There's no such thing," she informed him, sourly.

He shrugged his massive shoulders. "So I'm the Great God Pan," he said. "What difference does it make? And how come you're so smart all of a sudden?"

"I'm not thirteen anymore," she told him, proudly. "I've been thirteen for thirty years, but now I'm growing up. The whole world's growing up — for the first and last time."

"Not me," said the Great God Pan. "I'm a million years old and I'll *never* grow up. Let's get on with it, shall we? I'll count to ninety-nine. You start running."

Dream-Wendy scrambled to her feet, and ran away. She ran and she ran and she ran, without any hope of escape. Behind her, the music of the reed-pipes kept getting louder and louder, and she knew that whatever happened, her world would never fall silent.

When Wendy woke up, she found that the nightmare hadn't really ended. The meaningful part of it was still going on. But things weren't as bad as all that, even though she couldn't bring herself to pretend that it was all just a dream which might go away.

She knew that she had to take life one day at a time, and look after her parents as best she could. She knew that she had to try to ease the pain of the passing of their way of life, to which they had clung a little too hard and a little too long. She knew that she had to hope, and to trust, that a cunning combination of intelligence and love would be enough to see her and the rest of the world through — at least until the next catastrophe came along.

She wasn't absolutely sure that she could do it, but she was determined to give it a bloody good try.

*And whatever happens in the end, she thought, to live will be an awfully big adventure.*



*This is the story of a guy named Morty. Nobody's really sure who he is—not Shilling, not Peterson, not Morty himself. But what about the green Coupe de Ville?*

# Jelly Bones

*By Robin Aurelian*

SOMETIMES BONES ARE just an inconvenience. I melted mine.

This is a handy talent to have when one is trapped in a small space and the only way out is an even smaller opening. This sort of thing happened to me all too frequently. I wasn't sure why people were always so upset with me. They didn't seem to feel this way about most of the other people I saw them interacting with.

In the present small dark space where I was trapped, I couldn't actually find a door, and the space was full almost to the top with liquid. I had swallowed some of the liquid when I was first dumped into it, and I was pretty sure it wasn't water. It didn't taste like anything else I'd tasted since I became aware.

There was no light, so there was nothing to see. I closed my eyes.

I took a really big breath — when one had jelly bones and the rest of one was pretty stretchy one could take a really big breath — and dove to the bottom of the enclosed pool, feeling along the walls for anything

useful. A crack, perhaps, or a drain I could pull the plug from or unscrew or otherwise manipulate. My fingers had the ability to shape and harden or soften as I directed them. Most of my body did. A screwdriver from an index finger was nothing, Phillips or flathead, I didn't care, although turning a screw was a bit more involved, since all of me had to turn.

The inner surface of the pool was smoother than most surfaces I had encountered. It didn't even have any corners, just curves. It reminded me of glazed porcelain, pleasant to feel even though it was cool to the touch. For a while I rolled along the walls, enjoying the smoothness against my skin. But tactile pleasure wouldn't do me much good in this situation if I ran out of air.

I swam back up to what was left of the air pocket. Most of the air was already inside me. I had been trickling carbon dioxide out through my skin while I swam and searched. There had to be a door in this compartment somewhere. After all, I had been stiff with bones when Shilling dropped me in here; when I had bones, I was pretty big and not a bit oozy. At least, I thought I had been bony; I had also been in a somewhat intoxicated state so I wasn't sure of anything. Even if I had been compressible, he must have pushed me in through some sort of crack or other. Where could it be?

It eluded me for a long time, until I pressed as much of myself against the curved walls, floor, and ceiling as I could and still maintain cohesion. I focused all my awareness on the nerves in my skin and crept from the bottom to the top of my space. After a long silent time I realized that there was the thinnest crack in the porcelain above the air pocket, a crack that formed a circle.

I pressed what I could of myself up into the crack and exerted as much pull as I could. Time and space narrowed down to my efforts to work my way out of this fix. After an indeterminate while, the doorway came open and I oozed up and out, dropping the door into the pool behind me. It sizzled.

I found myself in a corridor, which I realized was dark as soon as I reactivated my eyes. I felt my way along the floor and walls and found that they were not as slick as the pool's inner surface had been; they were something else entirely. I tasted them and concluded that the floor was dressed stone and the walls were very cold and sweating plasterboard. There were other tastes on the floor. A lot of people in a variety of shoes

had passed this way, and not too long ago. I tasted someone's spitwad before I realized what it was. I was pretty sure it had come from someone I knew.

"Should be dead by now," said a strange voice not far enough away.

"I wouldn't bet on it," said someone more familiar. "Morty has a way of getting out of tough spots." The voices were coming closer.

I considered my options. I could run or ooze or flow down the corridor away from them into the unknown, or I could hide from them as they discovered my disappearance, then follow them away to someplace people preferred to be, or —

I unjellied my bones and pulled myself together, unblobbing until my form was as human as I could make it, though I had a feeling I had messed up a few details here and there. Let alone I had lost my clothes before I escaped the pool. I wasn't sure how or when; I only knew that they hadn't been in my way when I made my explorations. Breathing out the extra air that had me swelled up like a watermelon, I settled around my bones. I sat with my feet dangling down into the hole I had climbed out of, and waited for the voices to bring their forms with them.

They also brought light.

I used it to give myself a quick once-over. Oops. Six fingers on one hand. I reabsorbed the extra one. I stalked an eye out and glanced at my face. Mouth should be *below* the nose — I fixed that too, then sucked the eye back into its socket.

"Damn," said the first voice.

"Hi, Morty," said the second voice.

I squinted past the flashlight shining on me and recognized Pete Peterson, one of Shilling's chief thugs. He had been nicer to me than anybody else, and I liked him.

"Hi, Pete," I said. "I get the idea somebody's mad at me, but I don't remember why."

"How could you forget a thing like that?"

"Like what?"

"No joke, you don't remember?"

"Remember what?"

"Shilling was having one of those parties where he had a bunch of important customers around the pool, enjoying free alcohol and drugs and



trying to out clothes-horse each other, and you showed up yelling and waving three knives in each hand. You threw the knives and hit some people in the clothes, but never actually wounded anybody — did you do that on purpose? I bet you did. You pushed people into the pool three at a time while yelping like a buckaroo. You don't remember any of that?"

"Nope." It didn't sound like me. Or maybe it did. I still didn't know very much about myself.

"You were screeching something about being Kali or Shiva or one of those many-armed Hindu gods. And swearing you wanted to drink peoples' blood and wear their skulls for a necklace. It was like you got religion. For a minute there I had some hope for your future, but you didn't follow through. You didn't manage to hurt anybody. How could a little thing like that slip your mind?"

"Maybe I left a piece of my mind behind while I was getting out of that septic tank or whatever it was." I pointed between my legs to the hole below.

"You mean the acid bath?"

"Acid?" I said. I'd never experimented with acid before. I had been swimming around in acid, and I hadn't noticed it acting any differently from water or chocolate milk. It had tasted different, but there were so many things I hadn't tasted that I hadn't known what it was.

"Most people we put in there dissolve entirely," Peterson said.

"Guess Shilling was really mad at me, huh?"

"Worst I've ever seen him," said Peterson. "You gotta stop coming around, Morty. Don't you get it that we don't want you here anymore?"

"Sometimes I get it, but I don't always have all the parts of my mind aligned into understanding," I said. I wondered if I should have said that. I had found it better to keep my inner workings to myself in most situations. The more I talked about them, the more upset people got with me. Maybe Peterson wouldn't understand.

"Some parts of your mind don't talk to some other parts?" he said, dashing another vain hope.

"I guess."

"Well, tell all the parts to understand this: you can't come here anymore. You're making the boss lose business. You've worn out your welcome. Find somebody else to love."

I stared into his flashlight for a long long time, trying to imprint myself with the information he'd given me. It hurt.

Shilling was the first person I had met whom I could remember. I had opened my eyes in close darkness and hot silence, and then the trunk lid had popped open and there was Shilling, staring down at me where I was curled up, my wrists tied tight to each other and to my ankles behind my back.

Shilling was tall and old and wrinkled and he had a lot of stiff white hair that the sun startled into silver. I thought he was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, but then again, I couldn't remember seeing anyone or anything else in my whole life. A car gave birth to me, I figured out later, and Shilling was my midwife. "Who the hell are you?" he had asked, reaching down to rip the duct tape off my lips. "What is this?" he asked somebody I couldn't see. "I just wanted a mint-green Caddy Coupe de Ville. I didn't want it with somebody in the trunk!"

"Sorry, Boss," said the other voice, which belonged to Peterson, I had eventually learned.

The more I discovered about human dealings, the odder I found it in hindsight that Shilling had actually taken me to his home, released my hands and feet, fed me, talked to me, and even named me. Shilling being Shilling, it would have been more like him to just shoot me and dump me in the desert.

But he hadn't, and I loved him. I loved him for every word he had ever spoken to me, every time he had touched me, every attention he had ever paid me. His was the first face I could remember seeing, and I had imprinted on it. I wanted to serve and protect him and make him proud.

At first we had thought there might be something I could do in his service. He had tried to have me trained to be muscle, since he didn't think I had a chance in hell of being brains. Peterson had done the actual training, and mostly he had said things like, "Can't you hit harder than that? Okay, here's a nightstick, use leverage if you can't use strength — I barely felt that! You have to look to do damage, Morty!" I could hit cantaloupes and watermelons all day and break them into a shower of tiny screaming spattery pieces, or even artistically shaped shreds that resembled animals or aircraft, but I didn't seem to be able to really whale on people.

Although that hadn't stopped me from threatening people with knives and throwing them in the pool last night, according to Peterson. Maybe if I stayed drunk I could do all kinds of interesting things that I didn't seem capable of while I was sober.

"Are you sure there's nothing I can do for Shilling? Nothing at all?" I asked Peterson. I sounded pathetic even in my own ears.

"Give it up, Morty. The only thing he wants from you now is that you die. I would rather you went away, myself. I can't figure out how to make you die."

I stood up. The other guy who had come down with Peterson stepped back, and I realized that I was taller than I had been — taller than everybody, even Peterson. How had that happened? I didn't remember acquiring more mass, and where would I have gotten it? Now that Peterson told me I'd been in acid, I realized what had happened to my clothes. Something else had metabolized them before I could.

Peterson sighed. "Come with me, Morty, and I'll find you something to wear," he said.

"Thanks," I said. I shambled down the corridor in his wake, looking around. This was a part of the basement I had never seen before — must be lower than the usual dungeons and torture chambers, maybe even lower than the vaults. "What else is down here?"

"A bunch of other stuff that wouldn't work on you either," said Peterson.

"But this is the worst stuff, right?"

"Yeah, aside from direct methods like spraying you with a bunch of bullets or putting you through a sawmill blade a few hundred times and then watching to see if the pieces reconnect."

"And he hasn't tried this one on me before, has he?"

"Nope."

"He likes me." If he had restrained himself from doing the worst to me until now, he must like me on some level. Otherwise, why not try the most extreme methods first? He still hadn't tried the nasty ones that Peterson had just mentioned. I sensed a certain reluctance on Shilling's part.

"Sure, he likes you, but he can't have you around, Morty. You keep screwing up important things for him. You gotta get out and stay out. You understand? Bullets next time, probably."

"I understand," I said. At least some part of me understood. I wasn't sure how long that would last.

"You got awful big," Peterson said when we reached his quarters in one of the cabanas by the pool. The little man who had come down to the acid bath with him had faded away from us as soon as we left the basement, almost before I saw his face in the light and added it to my memory files of everything to do with Shilling. "I don't know what I got that might fit you."

"I don't know how I got bigger, Pete."

"How does anything happen with you? It's all a mystery." He flipped through the clothes in his closet, searched his dresser, came up with a big tie-dyed T-shirt and some baggy navy-blue swim trunks. I tried them on, and they fit — barely. I could turn my fingers into screwdrivers; it seemed to me I ought to be able to shrink myself, but I thought and thought at myself and couldn't make myself smaller. I tried ooshing some of me out to my arms and legs, and that worked a little bit. My hands and feet got bigger and the parts of myself that were really constricted by the clothes got somewhat smaller.

Peterson watched my efforts for a little while before turning away. I shrugged and shimmied and surged and finally got the clothes to feel comfortable. I had this urge to stick an eye out and look at myself, but I thought that might be going too far. Of the people I had met since my birth from the back of a Cadillac, Peterson was one of the most tolerant, but I couldn't figure out whether he would understand about eyestalks.

I wandered through his house and found a mirror instead. I wasn't sure about the results of my self-tailoring. I supposed weirder-looking people wandered the streets of L.A. Or perhaps not.

Peterson said, "Here's twenty bucks. Use at least some of it as bus fare to get as far away from here as possible."

"Thanks."

"I'm gonna tell the boss we finally got rid of you. Don't make a liar outta me, Morty."

I wanted to promise him I wouldn't, but I never made promises anymore. Something in me made me break them all the time.

He patted my shoulder a couple of times, reaching up to do it, and escorted me down to the secret gate at the far end of the grounds, making

it all right with the security guards there to let me out.

I wandered down the winding roads of Beverly Hills, heading toward Sunset and wondering what to do. If only I could talk to my mother, the car. It might have been able to tell me something about who I had been before, and maybe out of that information I would be able to find someplace or something to draw me away from Shilling. Too bad this idea hadn't come to me until I was banned from the estate.

Maybe if I found another mint-green Coupe de Ville...

I had never tried talking to cars before. I found a busy intersection with long lights and stood in the crosswalk facing traffic, saying hello to Hondas and Hyundais and Mercedes and BMWs, Fords and Chryslers and Mercury Bobcats. Most of them ignored me except to honk their horns. It wasn't a language I understood, but I kept trying.

Police stopped to talk to me a couple of times, told me to move along. I finally climbed on a bus the way Peterson had told me to, but the bus driver wouldn't take my twenty. I went into a store and bought a postcard, then jumped on another bus and used correct change.

I ended up in Chinatown a while later, still searching and restless and not having any idea what to do with myself. Escaping seemed to be what I was best at, but I only did that when provoked, and whatever I was doing now wasn't provoking enough for anybody to put me somewhere I could escape from. I wondered if I should try to be more provoking. The police could help me get locked up again, I was pretty sure.

I went into a restaurant and had some dim sum even though I didn't much need to get bigger. I wondered why I had been tied up and locked in the trunk of a car. Seemed ridiculous and useless to me now. I could have oozed out of there in seconds. Why had I lain there, frying in the sweat- and fear-smelling desert darkness, until Shilling popped the lid and let me out? What had my former self been planning? Or, more to the point, what had the people who put my former self in that car trunk been planning?

If only I could talk to that car.

I could talk to Peterson or Shilling, I supposed.

I got a bunch of change from a gift shop and went to a pay phone, then dialed Shilling's private line. "This is Morty," I said.

He hung up.

I dialed again. "Don't hang up."

He hung up.

Dialed again. "I just have a question."

"That bastard Peterson swore you were dead!"

"You sure he didn't say I was gone?"

"Huh?" He was quiet for a minute or two, but he didn't hang up.

"I'm gone, Boss. I just have a question. Who sold you that car?"

"I don't deal with details like that. Ask Peterson. The bastard."

"I don't have a number for him."

He swore some more, said, "Try Unemployment!" and cursed a few minutes longer, then told me a number to call.

"I'm sorry I messed up your party, Boss," I said. "I don't know what got into me."

"It better be the last time, Morty! Or the next time will be the last!"

"I'm trying to stay away," I said.

"One way or another you will," he said. He hung up.

I dialed the number he gave me and Peterson answered. When he heard my voice, he groaned.

"Just a question," I said.

"How did you get this number?"

"I asked Shilling."

"Morty! You're supposed to be dead! He has to kill me now!"

"I told him I was staying away."

"Get off the line. I have to leave!"

"Pete, who sold you the Caddy I came in?"

"Some chiseler in Vegas named Vinny Furness. Good-bye!" He hung up.

I wondered if he were really in trouble. I thought about Shilling for a little while and decided that a guy who could hand me a drink filled with arsenic, have me shot in the head with a .45, feed me to piranhas until they died of indigestion, buckle me into a chair and put a few million volts through me, and drop me in a vat of acid might do some serious damage to Peterson. I liked Peterson. He had always been nice to me.

So I caught a bus back to Beverly Hills. I asked the guards at the secret gate if Pete had come through there, but they told me, after some persuading, that he hadn't made it that far, that he was now in the basement up at the house. They shot me a few times while I was crossing

the grounds toward the house, but I made my back into some really hard kind of rubber that bounced the bullets off.

I got to the basement through one of the escape hatches I had discovered while exploring one day, and headed for the torture level in hopes that Shilling would deal with Peterson there instead of taking him lower.

Peterson was strapped to the big chair in the first room, the room with the big scary tools like pinchers and branding irons, mostly show for people who would scare easy, Pete had told me himself when he was trying his best to train me. Shilling was sitting in the comfortable observation chair, watching through his dark glasses as the shadowy little man who had come to the lower levels with Peterson to check on me in the acid vat held a glowing iron rod up to Peterson's face.

Peterson shook his head, sweating a lot. "There's nothing you can do to get rid of Morty, Boss," he said. "You know that and I know that. Getting him to leave under his own steam seemed like the best option."

"You irritate me," said Shilling. He sounded irritated.

"I'm sorry, Boss."

"Baldwin, give him a kiss of heat to help him remember how irritated I am," said Shilling.

"Baldwin, don't," I said, stepping into the room.

"Gaw damn, Morty, didn't I tell you to go away and stay away?" Peterson yelled.

"Yeah, but I got you in trouble. Come on." I walked over and grabbed the iron rod by the hot end, wrenching it out of the small guy's grip and tossing it over my shoulder into a corner. Then I unbuckled all of the straps holding Peterson into the chair and picked him up. He was sweaty and limp and trembling. And he had told me the red-hot iron rods were kid stuff. Made me wonder.

"Morty!" said Shilling. "What the hell happened to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"When did you turn into a giant?"

"Last night or this morning, Boss, I'm not sure." Maybe the dim sum had helped. My clothes were too tight again, and I'd eaten a lot of different kinds of dumplings.

"Do you know how stupid you look?"

"I have some idea," I said.

"Do you know how good you could look with the right wardrobe?"

"No."

"Do you know how to drive a car?"

"I don't know. I bet I could learn," I said, wondering if this would get me closer to the Coupe de Ville.

"You can't seem to attack people, but you could protect people, couldn't you? I mean, here you are trying to protect that asshole Peterson."

"Could be."

"You still loyal to me, Morty?"

"Sure, Boss."

"Still loyal, still stupid, and even better, a giant," Shilling muttered. "Tell you what, Morty. You can have Peterson as your own personal toy. He takes you down to my tailor, and we get you some really nice duds. He teaches you to drive. You don't ever get drunk or high again, and you leave my customers alone. You drive me places, and you act as my bodyguard when I ask you to. Whaddya say?" Then he muttered, "If there's any way to mess this up, he'll find it. I wonder how he could possibly mess this up?"

"Bodyguard?"

"Guard my body. If you can throw people in the pool, you could keep people off me, couldn't you? You don't have to hurt them, just keep them from hurting me."

"Okay," I said. I could be near him and maybe he wouldn't all the time be trying new methods of torture or murder on me. And I could talk to the Caddy. Not that it was likely to do any good.

"Go get decent-looking," he said, flipping his hand at me and Peterson.

Peterson was still shaky, so I carried him out. I set him down when we got to the garage. There were twelve cars inside the garage and more in the other garage. Peterson leaned against a dark green Jaguar while I walked over to the Coupe de Ville.

I sat on the cement in front of it. "Mom?" I said.

The car just sat there.

"Do you remember me?"

It didn't say anything.

"Do you remember where I came from?"

"The back door of the Kalahari Motel in Las Vegas," said a voice. "Probably."



The voice sounded like Peterson's. I glanced at him. He still looked wobbly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the guy I got the car from, he worked with people who headquartered in the Kalahari, and when they want to get rid of people they send them out the back door."

"Do you know who I am?"

"Nobody knows who you are, Morty. And I mean that. Nobody."

"Not even me," I said.

"Not even you."

"Come on, Pete. Let's go to Las Vegas," I said, standing up.

He was breathing almost normally. He stared at me, his eyes bugging out. "The tailor...the car...driving lessons..."

"You can teach me to drive on the way."

He shook his head and he kept shaking his head while I piled him into a cherry-red convertible, opened the garage door, hot-wired the car, and drove the car down the driveway to the main gate. Interesting. I seemed to know how to drive. Security called up to the house and Shilling told them they could let me out, because the gate opened.

It took Peterson miles and miles to settle down. He tried to grab the wheel, he tried reasoning with me, he tried screaming at me to stop, he tried to jump out of the car. I stretched out a jelly-boned arm and dragged him back in, then fastened his seatbelt. He sat shivering in the passenger seat and stared at my arm for a while after that.

When he got over it, he tried to make me feel guilty by telling me I was signing his death warrant. That gave me pause. What was I doing? Why? And why was I doing it to Peterson, who had always been nice to me?

Who was I, the one doing these things? If the answer came to me, would I hate it?

I pulled into a truckstop in the mountains as night fell. Peterson looked too shaky to go on without some sort of necessary thing, and food or coffee were the only things I could figure.

I ordered him a couple of hamburgers and me a couple more, even though I didn't feel hungry.

"You can't be doing this, Morty," Peterson said after a while, his voice quiet and reasonable. His face was white, with gray smudges under his

eyes. The waitress brought us food and we ate. "You can't be doing things he doesn't tell you to. He'll find us like that." He snapped his fingers. "He knows which car we're in, and he'll have the highway patrol out looking for us. We should go back. Maybe it's not too late."

"We can buy clothes in Las Vegas. Shilling's got a tailor there, doesn't he? And I'm driving pretty good, aren't I?"

"I wish you were in little pieces at the bottom of a bunch of different canyons," he said quietly but as if he meant it.

I ate my hamburgers and started on his second one, which he hadn't touched.

"I'm gonna go phone the boss," he said.

When he turned his back on me I felt strange, as if all the sand were running out of me. I had a man's name and the name of a hotel, and I had no guarantees that even if I found out any more information I would be closer to knowing about myself. I wasn't like anyone I had met since I came awake in that trunk. Maybe there was no one else like me anywhere.

Now Peterson, whom I had thought was my friend, was upset with me and wished I were dead. I couldn't remember him wishing that before, even when he was trying to kill me.

Shilling had offered me a job. I could have stayed in L.A. and had a place to be and work to do, been near someone I loved. But I had probably screwed up that chance too by running away from it.

I bit my plate. It crunched. A lot.

"Stop it, Morty," said Peterson, back from the phone booth. "People are staring."

I looked around and realized that truckdrivers and tourists were staring at me. I bit the plate again. I had lost sand, and this tasted like a decent replacement.

"Shilling says it's all right that we're going to Vegas," Peterson said, sitting down and pretending he didn't know me, or maybe pretending that he didn't know what I was doing. "Based on his tone of voice, I'd say that he's alerting his connections and they'll take us out into the desert and shoot us as soon as we get there. He hates it when people don't do what he tells them to. He just can't stand it."

I finished off the plate and ate my glass. Different consistency and texture from the plate, but still pretty good.

"Let's ditch the car and head for Mexico," Peterson said.

"I added the dishes to your bill," said the waitress, dropping off our check.

"Tasty," I said. My clothes were strangling my mid-portions again. I shifted lungstuff into my upper arms so I could breathe. The waitress went away.

"Otherwise I'll spend the rest of my life wondering when I'm going to wander into a bullet," said Peterson.

"Do you ever," I said, trying to push my stomach in but making my back pop out into a hunch instead, "wonder where I came from?"

"You came from hell," he said.

"Does that seem likely to you?"

"Well, no, actually. But then again, nothing seems likely where you're concerned."

"I wonder where I came from."

"Forget it, Morty. Nobody knows. Vinny doesn't know. I called him after we found you in the Coupe de Ville, and he was just as surprised as we were, or he pretended to be. Said he didn't leave any bodies in the trunk. You won't get anything more out of him. Anyway, I think somebody had him killed a couple months ago."

"You said I came out of the back door of the Kalahari."

"Just a guess." He frowned. "An educated guess. A lot of people on the road to hell take their first step from the back door of the Kalahari. It's a regular dumping site. But you won't get anything out of anybody at that hotel, Morty. Nobody will know anything, no matter who you talk to."

No one knew who I was or where I had come from.

No one.

Except maybe me, in some part of my mind I hadn't connected to recently.

"Will Shilling really have people waiting to shoot us when we get to Las Vegas?"

"Yes," he said. "Or maybe they're on their way toward us now."

"You want to go to Mexico."

"South America, maybe. Louisiana. Alabama. Someplace Shilling won't look for us. He's well connected along the West Coast and in Nevada, and he has some good connections in New York, but if we get off his map and go someplace where we won't bother him, maybe he'll leave us alone."

It is cold and wet where we live now, in the north, and I have turned indolent with winter. I crave strange foods like woodchips and rusted metal and dead leaves and used motor oil. I haven't told Pete what I find to eat when I go on my walks. He tries not to notice that I am taking up more and more room in our apartment, but I know he sees it, because he tells me to only go out late at night and to walk in the woods, not in the streets.

I got a job loading freight when we first reached this town. Pete got an office job and moved up to management at a small parts supply business. He still has his job, but I lost mine. I outgrew it.

Before I left my job, the guys there told me I was a freak and belonged in a circus. I asked Pete if maybe this was true. He said it might not be a bad place to hide out, but he liked his job and wanted to stay where we were.

"Do you think I came from a circus?" I asked him.

He shook his head. He studied me, really studied me, for the length of three muted commercials. He drank more beer. His show came back on and he watched it for fifteen minutes, then muted the TV when more commercials came on. "You used to be a guy," he said. "I saw you in the back of that car, and you were just a guy. A guy in a really bad Hawaiian shirt and okay blue jeans. I don't know how you turned into whatever it is you are now. Maybe it was something you ate. Maybe you got hit by an alien ray. Maybe it's some kind of disease that starts up late in life. But I don't think you came from the circus."

Since that conversation his eyes slide over me. He brings me strange things from the supermarket — bones, tripe, organ meats — and doesn't seem to mind that I eat them without cooking them. He doesn't seem to think about me much at all. He talks to me. He tells me about his day. He plays cards with me. Every once in a while he'll talk about his life with Shilling. He sits in his recliner in the evening and drinks beer and I sit behind him and near him and we watch TV, and I watch him. He smiles.

I have wondered more than once if it was an unforgivable thing I did, taking him away from his life, forcing him to start over. I don't ask him. I am more glad than I can say that he comes home every evening.

I'm not sure what I'm growing into. Since I spend so much time cooped up in the apartment alone, I've begun mind experiments, seeking through the pieces of my mind for useful information, and occasionally

coming up with fragments out of which I am assembling a picture. I also study a book Pete got for me from the library on animals of the world and try out different shapes, but I haven't found one that feels right yet. As long as I have a recognizable face when Pete gets home from work, he can put up with me.

Yesterday I tried something new. I reached out with a large piece of me, enough of a piece to make a whole being, and shaped it like a boy. I put into it all the things it would need to function on its own, bones, blood, organs, nerves, skin, muscle, brain, and what I could of the intangible in me — thoughts I have had, feelings I have felt. I thinned my connection to it.

It breathed on its own. It opened and closed its eyes. It reached out with its little hands and grasped the book of animals. It turned pages and stared down at the pictures. It looked at me, then. It smiled.

It touched me. It stroked its hands along my sides, patted my belly. It leaned against me and closed its eyes.

Almost, I let it go. But I was afraid it would die. When it came and leaned against me, I let it right back inside me, but I did not dissolve its boundaries.

As soon as Pete left this morning I let the little boy out again. We talked with each other. He walked into the other room, trailing the cord that connected us to each other. He looked through the refrigerator. He brought me back some cottage cheese, which I did not remember wanting, but as soon as he gave it to me I knew I had wanted it all along.

This afternoon we talked some more. He reached out and broke the cord between us.

He lives.

He pushed back inside me but I would not let him reconnect, even though he cried.

He got over it.

I hope Pete likes him. I wonder what his name is. Maybe Pete will figure it out.

Here is what I think: I don't know who I am or where I came from. Whatever I am, I can make more of me, and set my children loose to find their own destinies. Maybe it's not important to find out who and what I am. Maybe it's only important to know that I will go on from here. ♪



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# FORGOTTEN TREASURES

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MIKE RESNICK

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**F**IRST OF ALL, I'd like to thank all of you who took the trouble to send letters or e-mail commenting on the first column in this series.

A few of you wanted to know what I had against Heinlein, Asimov, and Clarke, since I didn't recommend any of their books.

The answer, of course, is Nothing. Check the title again: I'm recommending forgotten treasures of science fiction and fantasy, books a lot of you may never have encountered. Just about every word of fiction written by Heinlein, Asimov and Clarke is still in print, and if you're reading this magazine, you certainly don't need me to point out that *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*, *The Caves of Steel*, and *Childhood's End* are pretty good reading.

You may need me to tell you a little something about the late Clifford D. Simak's *Way Station*, and that's a pity, because even be-

ing a Hugo winner by one of our field's giants hasn't kept it continuously in print.

Simak was a long-time editor of the *Minneapolis Star* who broke into science fictional print in 1931 and stuck around through 1986. He was a very gentle man, and in a field noted for thud and blunder, he wrote very gentle stories.

*Way Station* concerns Enoch Wallace, who didn't die in the Civil War, and may now be well over a century old, though he appears to be a young, healthy man to his neighbors, all of whom are perfectly content not to pry into his life.

The United States government doesn't share that attitude, and when the corpse of an alien is discovered in a nearby grave, Wallace — who is the keeper of a galactic way station for equally gentle aliens who are traversing the cosmos — must find a way to hold the government at bay without revealing any of the secrets with which he has been entrusted.

A beautiful and moving book, showing Simak at the peak of his formidable powers.

Whenever someone asks me for a science fiction novel to stir the interest of a young reader, I don't give the usual answer, which is to send him searching for generic Robert A. Heinlein or Andre Norton juveniles.

Instead I always suggest one title, with an explanation that if the kid likes *Star Trek*, maybe he'd like to see where most of the format came from. These days I add that if he liked *Alien*, maybe he'd also like to see where the alien was borrowed from. (Yes, I can say that; the author received a settlement from the movie's producers.)

The book is *The Voyage of the Space Beagle*, and the author is the most recent recipient of the Nebula Grandmaster Award, A. E. van Vogt.

The plot is really quite simple: the *Space Beagle*, populated by military and scientific personnel, is charged with exploring the galaxy — and it runs into a seemingly endless series of BEMs (Bug-Eyed Monsters, for the uninitiated), each more dangerous than the last.

The two most memorable are Coeurl and Ixtl, and in the five-plus

decades since they menaced the *Space Beagle*, no one has improved upon them.

Great fun.

Time for a confession. I liked the late John Brunner personally — but I didn't like his writing very much. Just not to my taste. It happens; you can't like every book you read. Or every writer.

Anyway, hang on to that revelation, while I tell you about a totally neglected Ace Double novel by a totally unknown writer. The author is Keith Woodcote, and the book is *I Speak For Earth*.

It's a wonderful novella about our first alien contact. We know they're there, they've asked to see one representative of our race, and we have no idea what the outcome of this interview (or is it a trial?) might be.

So what we do is this: we take five men and women of different skills (and nationalities, and outlooks, and prejudices) and find a way to transfer their essences into the head of a sixth man, the best physical specimen of the group. The story concerns the training of this amalgam, and his/its/their eventual confrontation with the aliens. The ending is a lot more cynical and powerful than the typical Ace

Double reader had any right to expect.

I went right out and hunted up Keith Woodcott's other three Ace books. They weren't quite as good as this one — which, trust me, is award quality — but they were all pretty damned good.

You could have knocked me over with a feather when I found out, some years later, that Keith Woodcott was a pen-name John Brunner used for his grind-them-out-for-money novels.

Why do fine writers speak of Stanley Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey" in tones of awe, or at least deep respect? After all, it's a pulp story by a pulp author, and it didn't have any plot, so what's the big fuss?

For the answer to that, you have to pick up his collection, *A Martian Odyssey*, and remember that prior to the appearance of these stories, most aliens were written on about the level of Edgar Rice Burroughs' Martians — either identical to humans except for skin color, or physical grotesques that nonetheless had goals and attitudes (and speech patterns) that were identical to those of the human characters. Or else — and perhaps most often — they were purple people eaters.

What Weinbaum gave us were *alien* aliens. The most memorable is Tweel, who *almost* makes sense, and then, just when you and the narrator are sure you've got him pegged, he dives 35 feet into the dirt, head-first, with the enthusiasm that most creatures reserve for sex. Then there's Oscar, the intelligent plant — an Einstein with no sense of self-preservation — from "The Lotus Eaters." And there are a host of others, all equally alien.

Yes, the prose could be a little more elegant, and the plots could be a tad more logical — but in exchange for those lacks you get an arterial infusion of Sense of Wonder. I think you'll find it's a fair trade.

So what's the funniest science fiction novel ever written? Easy. It's Robert Sheckley's *Dimension of Miracles*, and, perhaps because I've written so much humor myself, I'm willing to go out on a limb and say that it ranks among the half-dozen best novels the field has produced.

Sheckley wrote a ton of funny stories in the 1950s. He was incapable of writing a dull page, or even an awkward sentence...but he was just doing what Kuttner and Brown and others did, only a little better and a lot more often.



But came the 1960s, and Sheckley started growing as an artist. First there was *Journey Beyond Tomorrow*, and then *Mindswap*, both of which built to the absolute genius of *Dimension of Miracles*, and one day we suddenly realized what he had done.

John Campbell once said that there was nothing truly new in science fiction, that Doc Smith had given us the stars and we were still waiting for the next breakthrough. Well, Campbell must not have read *Dimension of Miracles*, for what Sheckley accomplished with this book was to create a knee-slapping, guffaw-out-loud form of humor that only worked as science fiction.

Think about it. And then hit your paperback resale shop and hunt it up.

Let me tell you about one very accomplished lady — a sweet, friendly, approachable woman whom I still miss.

Her name was Leigh Brackett, and most of you, if you recognize that name at all, will remember her as the screenwriter for *The Empire Strikes Back*. This was nothing new; Leigh wrote four or five of John Wayne's best films, and also co-authored *The Big Sleep* for Bogart and Bacall.

She was married to Edmond Hamilton, whose name should be familiar to all of you who still love space operas — after all, he created Captain Future — and despite her Hollywood triumphs, she was first and foremost a science fiction writer.

She grew up in the pulp era, and was strongly influenced by Edgar Rice Burroughs' tales of Barsoom. So influenced, in fact, that she created her own Martian hero (Eric John Stark) and her own Martian world — and there's a strong body of opinion that says she did it even better than Burroughs.

If you'd like to decide for yourself, the best exemplars of her Martian tales can be found in an old Ace Double — *People of the Talisman* on one side, and *The Secret of Sinharat* on the other. They were reprinted as *Eric John Stark: Outlaw of Mars* about fifteen years ago. Give 'em a try.

Some younger readers have the misconception that Gene Wolfe's brilliant *Book of the Long Sun* tetralogy was the first to examine the final days of an Earth in the thrall of planetary entropy.

Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. Jack Vance's first book, *The Dying Earth*, was

there three decades earlier, with its stunning evocation of a far-future world where magic has replaced science — and wizards, witches, demons and monsters share the stage with roughish princes, princely rogues, and not-so-innocent maidens. The stories that make up the book are almost prose poems, displaying the enormous promise that Vance would deliver upon time after time over the next four decades.

If you yearn for a fantasy that is neither a Tolkein ripoff nor an unillustrated barbarian killer comic book, don't pass this one by.

So who is William Tenn and why isn't he writing a story a month like he did in the Good Old Days?

Well, who he is is easy: he's actually a gentleman named Phil Klass. More to the point, he stands, with Robert Sheckley, as one of the two finest satirists of the *Galaxy Magazine* school. Slick, prolific, witty, sly, mature.

In 1968 Ballantine brought out a matched set of six William Tenn books, five collections and a novel. Beautiful set of books. Great reading.

And during the next two decades, William Tenn virtually dis-

appeared, producing only one (admittedly brilliant) short story.

The good news is that he's writing again, and has signed a contract for a new collection. Readers can rejoice, because, trust me, William Tenn is about 20 years overdue to be a Worldcon Guest of decade late as a Nebula Grandmaster.

Any of his collections will delight you, but the one I'm recommending this issue is *The Wooden Star*.

Remember A. E. van Vogt's classic *The World of Null-A*, about a world based on non-Aristotelian logic? Here you have Tenn's cynical answer, "Null-P," about a world based on non-Platonic logic.

Do you like stories about con men who sell the Brooklyn Bridge? Then try "Betelgeuse Bridge."

But the masterpiece of the book is a novelette, "The Masculinist Revolt" (*F&SF*, August 1965), guaranteed to offend feminists and male chauvinists, and delight the hell out of everyone else.

If you haven't read Tenn, if you've only heard of him, you owe it to yourself to find out what you've been missing.

Finally, there's a fellow out there who actually rode west in a covered wagon. Not as a gimmick or a publicity stunt. As a settler —

or the child of one. When the first issue of *Amazing Stories* reached him, he fell in love with the field and decided that he wanted to spend his life writing science fiction. He sold his first story to Hugo Gernsback in 1928 — and he's still writing today.

He's Jack Williamson, the unquestioned Dean of Science Fiction, and he will be happy to point out (but only if asked; he's an incredibly modest man) that if he has a book come out four years from now, he will have published science fiction in nine different decades.

His best book isn't science fiction at all — though partisans of *The Humanoids* may protest. It's a fabulous fantasy novel entitled *Darker Than You Think*. Ostensibly it's an adventure story about lycanthropy — or, more expressly, the battle for dominance between lycanthropy and humanity. But be-

cause Williamson was never as simple as the magazines he wrote for, in this instance lycanthropy symbolizes freedom — from bodies, from morals, from everything that hinders Man — and the novel, while qualifying as one of the best thrillers in the genre's history, also examines the price one must pay for that freedom.

If you're going to read the Dean — and of course you should — you might as well start at the top, and pick up a copy of *Darker Than You Think*.

That's it until next time. Good luck treasure-hunting — and remember, every one of these books had at least one paperback edition, and should be available for a pittance — or at worst, two pittances — at your local paperback resale shop or the dealers' room at a nearby science fiction convention.



*Pat MacEwen has worked as a marketing analyst, trucking dispatcher, Kelly girl, mystery shopper, and proofreader. She ran a mainframe for an aerospace company and dug worms for the Institute for Marine & Coastal Studies at USC, and now she works as a Field Evidence Technician for the police department. In the tale that follows, she shows us a family with a special gift, one that might not be worth having.*

# The Macklin Gift

*By Pat MacEwen*

**M**Y FATHER IS AN UGLY MAN.  
He stands six feet three in his stock-

ing feet and his nose is an overgrown bread hook that leans to the left when he frowns, which is often enough. It's further marred by a rounded hump across the middle, something like the bridge in a Japanese Tea Garden.

Gram says it came from a mallet belonged to a carpenter, French Canuck, from across the lake, that my Mom would've married instead if he'd ever come home from the Marne in '18, but how true that is, I couldn't say. Gram never mentions it when *he's* home. Mom only tells me, "Don't grow up too fast, Will. Fifteen only feels like forever."

But then she's the one stayed in bed of a morning, unwilling even to look at her husband's cadaverous face, a lean, dark, bony thing, built like a wall thrown together from odd lots of leftover bricks.

That last morning, I studied him over a wordless breakfast, cold bread, bacon, and hot black coffee, strong and bitter, brewed in Gram's old, battered blue enamel pot. She moved slowly, serving us, heaving the weight of her eight-months-swollen belly around the table.

Dad ate like a ravenous bear, growling deep in his throat while he tore at the bread.

I remember the way he looked up at me suddenly, jet black eyes full of speculation. "Eat up, boy," he told me sharply, his bull's voice startling in the near silence.

To Gram, he said, "We'll need a lunch box, woman. We're headed for Chapin today. There's a farmhouse about to be pulled down. A piece of the salvage is ours."

"But Will can't go!" she said, her faded voice as startling for its unexpectedness as Pa's had been for its depth. "He's got school."

"Not anymore," he said, and stuck his chin out at me. "You're done with that, boy. No use to you, anyhow, now when you've already got your trade."

"And what kind of trade is that?" Gram demanded, raising her reedy voice to the rafters. "Rag-picking? Junk? That's a living for old men and no-account tramps, not for boys with a mind and a future!"

He rose up and swung with one motion, catching her low in the left ear. Her false teeth popped out of her mouth as she fell against the stove's hot water tank and then down to the gray slate floor.

"What's good enough for me," he said, his dark voice gone even deeper with rage, "is damn well good enough for him!"

To me he said, "Let's have those books, boy."

Cautiously, I shoved my pack across the table. He upended it, spilling them out, then opened each in turn. My homework he crumpled and flung at the tinder box. Then he tore the flyleaf out of each book, removing the school's stamp of ownership. Even the library copy of Faulkner. He ripped out the sleeve for the library card and then flung the thing down again.

Satisfied, he shoved them back at me, saying sharply, "Mind you bring those along today. They'll fetch something at Whittaker's."

Then he flung himself into his worn wool jacket, and stomped out into the dawn.

"Help me," Gram said, wheezing, and I rushed to lend her an arm as she struggled to her feet. Her face had gone a soft transparent white with a hint of yellow, like old ivory. The forming bruise was a darkening puffiness.

Leaning heavily on me, she made her way to the bench and collapsed, then sat for a moment, her face hid away in the crook of her arm. At length, she drew a shuddering breath and raised her head to look at me.

"I'm too old for this," she said, resting one hand on her pregnancy. Then she smiled faintly. "And you're too young. Don't worry so, boy. I'll be all right."

Outside, the truck's engine clattered to life, protesting the hour with groaning pistons and tap-tapping valves. Pa treated it like an old horse, said you had to get its blood to moving of a morning.

I rushed around, gathering sandwich makings, throwing some red apples into a sack. As the clock struck six, I hurried out, casting a single guilty backward glance at my grandmother's worn, weary face. For a moment, she looked like a ghost out of one of her own fairy tales.

We headed first for the docks at Ogdensburg, where Dad did business with men off the fishing boats and barges. All manner of things wandered up the St. Lawrence and off of those boats and climbed into the back of our truck, things a revenuer might've liked to lay his hands on. This time, there were black-labeled cartons of cigarettes, calf leather shoes, and a case of Gordon's gin, not to mention a fat green sturgeon.

In spite of them repealing Prohibition last year, Limey gin's still scarce enough to bring a handsome price, and so that was our best piece of work for the day.

Afterward, we skipped our usual rounds, turning southeast to drive past a half dozen houses where we might have stopped on another Monday. I saw women's faces in most of their windows, wives, girls, and grandmothers, all of them watching us pass them by, with never a smile or a wave of the hand.

Instead, Pa pulled in alongside the Franklins' tired clapboard house, out along Old Creek Road. Jackie Franklin'd finally gotten a spot at the chocolate works, which meant his wife, Annabel, was home all alone.

It was her bought the sturgeon.

She wore a green dress, I remember. An old-fashioned ribbon the same color wound through her hair. Bright yellow hair, buttercup yellow my mother would call it, all tumbling loose down her back. She was pretty enough to warm my face when she grinned at me.

I remember too that she had a high spirit, a willfulness that sparkled

in every word. She argued with Pa like she would've a passing tramp. Hand on her hip, she scorned his price, then complained of the sturgeon's size, and finished up by calling him a liar and a thief.

I heard him laugh softly in answer to that and I felt a cold fist of dread closing around my heart. I knew what came next and I wanted desperately to be somewhere else, but like Annabel, I was helpless, caught up in his presence. So I stood there, stupid, aching, my cap in my hand, and watched him take her.

He laughed again, louder this time, and her head came up. She met his black eyes evenly, not flinching.

Then something flowed through the air and her eyes went moist and flat, widening out into ice blue plates. An invisible energy slid from my father and snaked its way round her in fat smoky coils. She shuddered once, licking her lips, a pink flicker of tongue, and her face lost all expression, becoming no longer entirely Annabel.

Shivering, she beckoned to my father, her hand trembling, yet curiously lifeless.

He smiled, nodded silently and took her arm. Leading her inside like a puppeteer stringing his marionette, he turned at the door and told me to wait outside, his voice gone hoarse.

I nodded and drove the truck into a sunny patch next to a leafless elm in the yard, as far from the house as I could get without actually leaving.

It didn't help. In my mind's eye, I could have pictured the whole damn thing, down to the last detail, even if I'd been struck stone deaf. And dear God, I had not.

I sat on the running board, knotting my fingers together until my knuckles went white and the blood stood out in bright pink bands across each nail. A red current of heat flowed through me, as though an invisible wire connected my face with a stirring reaction my britches could barely contain. From the house, of a sudden, I heard a harsh clatter, as if metal tools had been brushed from a work table onto the floor. They hadn't bothered to close the door.

There followed a longer bit of silence while I gnawed my lip. It was followed by a low animal kind of snarling. More sounds, high and childish cries of pain, of eagerness scattered amongst others darker, more guttural, then the sharp stutter of wooden legs scraping across a stone floor.

I stuffed my thumbs into my ears, trying to shut them out, knowing it was hopeless. My body, hot and throbbing, would have betrayed me anyhow, since even stopping up my ears would never wipe away the memory of things I'd heard every night of my life through walls too old and thin.

It didn't take long, thank God. It never did.

Fifteen minutes later, Pa reappeared, thumbs hooked under his belt as he sauntered across the yard.

Through the doorway, I glimpsed Annabel. She was tugging at her skirt, then buttoning down a sleeve to cover dark red marks on her arm, her fingers keeping busy while her eyes watched his back with the joyless bruised look all of Pa's women shared.

I looked away, hot blood flooding my face as I scrambled across the seat, Pa climbing into the truck.

"Let's be off," he said. "That house in Chapin won't wait forever, nor Whittaker neither."

I didn't move, just sat there glaring at a crack in the windshield's lower corner.

"Will'am?" he said.

I didn't answer.

"Boy, what's the matter with you?"

His hand, as rough and gnarled as old oak, reached out, taking me by the chin. He pulled me around to face him, then shoved his other hand into my crotch, where he squeezed me, painfully. I yelped and punched him in the arm till he let go and caught my fist.

But then, to my complete surprise, he simply sat there a moment, watching me, thoughtful-like.

He said, "Like that, is it?"

He let go of my hand and nodded to himself, then chuckled. He started the truck with a roar, over-gunning the engine, backed into the road and got us moving.

Once under way, he even grinned.

"I was beginnin' to worry about you, boy," he told me. "Now me, it come on me when I was twelve, like it come to my father before me. What you'd call the first flower of manhood." He laughed at his own wit.

"You, though, you're a good three years late. I was starting to wonder if you were my son at all."



I shot him a hard sharp look out of the corner of one eye, breathless, a wild surge of hope sweeping over me, but he was watching the road up ahead where a hay load had pulled out and didn't take notice.

"Oh, I understand how you're feelin', boy. Don't you worry about it. As time goes by, the call gets louder, but the answer gets better, ya know what I mean? It'll grow on ya."

God, what did that mean?

"When you're grown," he continued, expansive, his sudden talkativeness uncharacteristic, unsettling, "you'll find it's a fever in your blood, a thirst that'll swell your tongue and crack your mouth. A fine heat — warms your whole body."

He leaned out the window, hawked and spat.

"Only thing to do when you're thirsty is drink. Find yourself a woman. Won't be hard. That's the gift of our line, Will'am. The Macklin men've always had a way with the ladies."

Again that dry, hard laugh.

"With a little practice, you'll see. Women'll fall at your feet, beggin' for it."

I thought of Annabel Franklin with her trembling hands and her bruises. I thought of Gram, forty-three years old and eight months gone with a nameless child that might be her death. I thought of my mother, the pain, and the lost look I saw in her face every morning, as though she'd misplaced her soul overnight. Had they all begged for that?

Did its like lie in my future? An endless parade of unhappy women with emptied faces? What pleasure could any man take from a gift that is never returned?

I shuddered.

My father went on heedlessly. "And you'll never have to worry, boy. A girl who's been laid by a Macklin'll never go crying to Mamma, nor tell her old man. No shotgun weddings, or bastards, either."

He nodded, full of self-satisfaction. "Fact is, Will'am, the Macklin seed runs thin. If you want any kids of your own, you'll have to plow the same field, over and over again. Or your crop'll be damned thin as well."

How many times did you plow your acre, I wondered, begetting your three and a half?

Something curdled deep in my belly, raising a sheen of sweat on my face, as if summer had suddenly skipped ahead of spring, delivering out-of-season warmth.

"There's one thing I will tell you," Pa said. He was looking at me now. "I've said I understand your needs. I do. But there's some I won't stand for, and you'd better know it."

He glared at me, intent. "Don't ever touch your mother. Ever. Is that clear?"

I choked on a sudden gush of bile, kicked open the door and flung myself out of the truck. I landed on the dirt shoulder, rolling away and down into the ditch, then scrambled up and out with the best speed I could manage, plunging into a thicket of sumac and thrashing my way through it like a wild animal.

"Will'am!" he shouted. I heard a short agonized screech of old brakes. "Come back here, boy!"

I didn't, couldn't, was too busy being sick.

He shouted again, louder. I heard the door slam as he climbed down off the truck. The sound struck me like a spur in the flanks and I fought my way free of the brush. On the other side was a field of burnt corn stubble, not yet plowed for spring planting. I lit out across that like a scared rabbit two licks ahead of a coon hound.

I never looked back. Don't know whether he saw me or tried to follow. Right then, the only thought in my head was escaping him. I was terrified, more of those jet-black eyes than of facing his rage and his fists and his boots.

I ran, on and on, until lightning had stitched its way up my right side and my lungs had burned up in my throat, till I tripped on a rock and fell flat on my face in the mud.

Cold mud, like a sharp, wet slap in the face. I lay there panting for a while. When I could sit up again, I found I'd left the corn field far behind. I was almost back to Henderson, north of the river. I could see the kiln at the glassworks that'd been shut down ever since the bank went bust.

I picked myself up, brushing off the worst of the mud, and went on at a slower, saner pace. All the while I was walking, I tried to think.

My father (unbelievable!) had sounded proud of me. Like a farmer bragging on his prize bull's get. Like a man who sees himself in his son.

I gagged again, but the thought didn't go away.

Could he be right? Could a thing like that be passed on from father to son, down through generations?

Some things could, I knew. Feeble-mindedness, extra fingers, and sometimes Second Sight.

I thought of the past few weeks, me boiling inside, full of strange hot flashes, of dreams and sensations that hadn't made sense until now.

Wool-gathering. I was jarred out of it by a high, tart, almost-woman's voice, too near to hand. She cried out, "Jeez, Will, is that you?"

I stopped, and found myself faced with the one thing I didn't need, not right then. Hot, female curiosity blazing away in a pair of wide-eyed faces.

Mary Kingsley, squinting slightly, wore old-fashioned pince nez. She stared at me with the air of a puzzled tabby cat, one finger marking her place in a battered geography book. Her fingernail had cut Kansas in two.

Beside her, atop a low stone wall, Jean Mattington tilted her head back and stared down the length of her nose. She demanded, "What happened to you?" while Mary remarked, in her quietly feline way, "What a muddy mess!"

My face flamed scarlet again as I shrugged. I said, "Took a fall, that's all."

Mary nodded wisely, amused, and purred, "You weren't in school this morning."

Jean smirked. "You missed it. Lafferty farted in class, and the front row just about swallowed their tongues, it was so rank."

The two of them tittered. I thought about telling them how I was done with school, and with old man Lafferty too, but I found my own tongue had got tangled up into a knot.

The front of Mary's blouse, you see, was laced with a shiny blue ribbon that caught up the sunlight and glimmered a little with every breath. Staring, I noticed the way the white linen had molded itself to her body, and how, at the side of her throat, I could see the faint, regular pulsing of Mary's heart.

Heat of a different kind flooded my body. I found I was sweating again, like a horse, and in spite of the willow trees' shade.

Someone tittered again. It was Jean, I think, and I looked up at Mary's pink face with a start. But the tabby cat smile had disappeared, replaced

by a flat, expressionless, centered look. Her pale, thin lips had darkened too, the lower one caught between perfect white teeth.

Never looking away from me, Mary put down the geography book. With a sureness alien to her short stout legs, Mary stood, and then took a step toward me.

Jean said, softly, "Mary?"

Mary ignored Jean, the pulse in her throat speeding up, the white linen and blue ribbon quivering as she came nearer, and nearer yet, and then she'd got rid of the spectacles. She was lifting a hand to my face as she pressed up against me and buried her face in the crook of my neck, and those perfect white teeth began nibbling at me.

I found that my arms had come up to embrace her, as if by their own free will. My grimy hands were now stroking the length of her back, from the base of her neck to her hips, and then lower, each time pulling Mary a little bit closer. She smelled of lavender.

"My God, *Mary!*" somebody hissed.

I looked over her shoulder at Jean, who was fish-eyed, agog. Again, my hand moved by itself, gently beckoning. Again, that curious flattening wiped away Jean's outrage, leaving no more than a shell of the outspoken girl I had known all my life.

She, too, stood up and moved toward me, puzzlement warring with something inside all her normal desires and needs, while her two clever hands found a way between Mary and me, one slipping around, in behind me, slowly circling toward its goal, while the other one slid underneath my belt, cool fingers carefully probing, in search of the part of me already straining and yearning for freedom.

When she found it, the touch of her fingers was more than my laboring heart could withstand. All the heat bottled up in me, all of the anger and hurt running deep in my flesh, like a vein of bright buttercup yellow, came surging up out of the shadows, a shuddering, wonderfully rhythmic explosion of exquisite, painful intensity.

When it had passed, like a tidal bore on the river, I opened my eyes.

Mary blinked at me, like an old box turtle waking from a short nap in the sun. With a faintly surprised expression, she pulled away, out of my arms, and stumbled backward, gazing first at me, and then down at her mud-streaked, blue-ribboned breasts.

With a tentative tug, and a flutter of long, black lashes, Jean pulled away from me too, and then stood for a moment and stared at her white-smeared hand.

In their faces, as though I had peered at the sun too long, there rose a pale and ghostly afterimage, empty eyes and a bruised, tight, thin-lipped mouth.

Annabel Franklin's mouth. My mother's eyes.

As the ghost image burned its way into my brain, as the two of them backed away further, I heard myself moaning. My knees gave way, and I sank to the ground.

Mary stood, shaking her head, while Jean wiped her hand on her handkerchief, nervously scrubbing away with soft cotton, her brown eyes still fastened on me.

Then, as I began to shake my head, I could see the light dawn in their faces. Watching, I saw the progression of disbelief, shock, and then horror...followed close by a kind of wary fascination.

Just like my father'd foretold.

But I hadn't done *anything*! That much, I swear, is the God's own truth. All I did was stand there and look at them, not even wanting them, not even *thinking* of...

No, no, wait. If I'm honest, I'll have to admit to the thought of it, *only* the thought, though, when Jean the last few months, had seemed to...but what was the use, with her father a councilman, someone important, and my Dad a trashpicker?

Maybe...oh hell and damnation! What does it matter?

The look in Jean's eyes as I fought my way back to my feet, and that horrible, faceless fascination broke...I can never get past that, now, can I?

Jean made a choking sound, like smothered laughter, only her eyes weren't laughing. Then she turned, forgetting Mary as well as the books and the wax paper bundles of lunch that still sat on the wall. The unclean hand clutched against her waist, she whirled about and ran from me like a woman pursued by a bull, by a demon, perhaps by the Devil himself.

Mary hesitated, even took a half step toward me, breathing hard and fast, but then, in her too, something snapped. She turned and ran as well.

My own first impulse, I admit, was born of total cowardice. I'd run away. I'd find a boat and stow away or I'd grab me a handful of boxcars. I'd

go just as far as I could, California, or maybe Samoa, someplace where Pa'd never find me.

Almost as quickly, I knew that I couldn't. What work could I hope to find in times like these, me with no trade worth mentioning and grown men standing in soup lines all over the country?

I couldn't even enlist.

Besides, it'd leave Mom at his mercy. Gram too, and Christine, who's only nine but growing up fast and pretty. Who'd chop their wood and draw their water? Who'd load and unload the truck every day? My brother Rick, not seven yet?

I couldn't simply walk away. If I couldn't protect them, I couldn't abandon them either.

By the time I reached the river, my mind was made up. I'd go home. He'd be mad about me running off, but I'd survived worse. No, the important thing was the long haul. How to stay in school, especially. Maybe the law could help there. Somehow too, I swore I'd find a way to stop him. Maybe not today, but soon, even if I had to use a persuader.

I got home at ten to one.

Dad wasn't there, must have gone on to Chapin without me.

I ignored my mother's questions and Gram too, setting about my chores in silence. One thing and another, I filled the whole afternoon. I was sitting at table with Gram and Christine and Rick, digging into a bowl of stew, listening to one of Gram's hairier fairy tales, the one about Old Redcap, when Dad did turn up.

"So there you are," he growled, standing arms akimbo in the doorway.

I put down my spoon and stood up, waiting.

In two steps, he reached me. His fist caught me full in the face and the force of it knocked me back into the wall, overturning the bench. My head struck hard, with an echoing thunk, and a moment of darkness enfolded me.

When I could see again, I was slumped against the highboy. Dad was sitting at the table in my place while Mother scurried, fetching his dinner.

He dug in without waiting, and downed half the bowl before looking at me again.

"Well, what are you waiting for? That truck's not going to unload itself."

I stumbled to my feet and then outside. Why he wasn't madder I couldn't imagine but felt no need of asking. The side of my face was already swelling up. I'd have a shiner by morning. I sluiced it with ice-cold water from the pump and set about unloading.

"What happened atween you?" Gram asked when she brought me the rest of my supper.

I ate without answering.

She watched me finish in silence, then took the dishes from my hands. Hers were growing gnarled with age, I noticed, roughened by constant housework. Mom being sick so much, it's Gram who really runs our household.

"All right, Will," she said. "If you won't say, I won't badger you." She mussed my hair gently.

She eased herself down on the chopping block beside me and we sat watching the night fall while she rubbed her swollen ankles. A thick white mist had risen at twilight and there were no stars to be seen.

Gram sighed, waving vaguely at the fog. "Be a full moon tonight," she said. "A night like this, with the fog and all, my Gram used to call it an asrai night. Used to tell us kids all kinds of things about the Fairy Folk, and how they like to travel in the mist. A night like this'n can open doors atween the worlds, and sometimes you can step right through, to the other side."

I nodded, trying to think what she must have been like as a child.

Hard to picture, unless you thought of Christine, sitting on *her* Gram's lap. That gave me a queer feeling...I don't know. Like a connection, a leap-frogging back to this great-great-grandmother I'd never known, except for her reflection in Gram, an old woman who also spun fairy tales all about brownies and elves, about water maids and fishermen who met them on the lake on misty nights.

She shifted again, and I couldn't help throwing a look at her belly. A grandmother. Too old to be having babies, I knew, and the thought of us living, of going on here, but without Gram....

No, better not think of that, drawing it down on us. Anyhow, I could see something else was chewing on her.

Finally, she said, "Your father's going to pick up a load of Jake Sullivan's hootch tonight. He'll likely take you with him."

I nodded, waiting, still puzzled.

"If he does," Gram said, and she paused, then rushed through the words, "you be careful, boy. Don't you start nothin', hear me? Don't fight back, whatever happens."

I stared at her. "Gram?" I asked, uneasy.

"No," she answered, harsh and hateful all of a sudden. "That's all I can say."

A small shiver ran right up the back of my neck. To hear Gram talking like that — it scared me some.

Especially when she said, almost to herself, "We can manage without *him*, Will, but we can't without you. And you can't do without your schooling. You're better than junk-dealing, better than bootlegging, boy. You can learn a good trade, you can use all that stuffing you've put in your head. You can take up most anything, if you've a mind to."

I stared at the ground. Small chance of that, if Pa had his way.

"Your grandfather, now, if he'd lived, if he'd been here...." but she broke off, her faded blue eyes suddenly bright with tears in the lamplight. I reached for her shoulder, but she wouldn't have it. She brushed me away with a sharp, short shake of her head.

Then, clasping my arm, she pulled herself upright. "Whatever comes tonight, be careful, Will," she warned me again. "He's a dangerous man, your Pa. More guts than brains."

With that, she turned away, vanishing into the kitchen, and left me there, worrying, wondering.

It was full dark before I came in. I'd taken my time with the truck, but the darkness brought a biting chill, hard to ignore.

My mother was, as always, a ghost in her own house, pausing only to touch my swollen jaw with a silent caress before retiring.

My brother and sister bent over a puzzle while Gram knitted. Most nights, she'd have been telling a story, describing a vengeful brownie, or maybe a leprechaun caught by a pair of resourceful children. Not tonight. She sat with the greater part of a fisherman's jersey spilled over her lap, and brooded silently.

Both kids sneaked a look at me and my battered face but only Christine dared to grin and give me a quick thumb's up. I winked back at her with my good eye.



My father was whittling, his knife peeling long yellow curls from a piece of ash. We had no electric wiring, no radio, and he liked to spend his evenings carving elaborate wooden chains. In a lot of ways, he was a throwback to olden days, and most of it, I thought, by choice. I think modern things made him uncomfortable. He stayed shut of them, everything he could, except the truck, and that he persisted in treating like some kind of stubborn, mechanical mule.

Without looking up, he told me to hunt up his rubber boots and his rain gear. Foggy or not, we had business to tend to.

I didn't want to. The way Gram'd talked...but I had to. He wasn't the man you could nay-say, so I kept my mouth shut, and gathered his stuff while he spent ten minutes in Mom's room, the bed creaking steadily.

Half an hour later, we left.

Gram was right. The moon was a full moon, what they call a hunter's moon, though we couldn't see it. With nightfall, the shimmering mist had got thicker and clotted, becoming a creamy white color.

The moon's bright shine couldn't pierce the fog, but gave it an unearthly glow, a queer cold white brilliance. It seemed to me, driving along in it, that there were strange currents flowing through the mist, a flutter of ghost shapes, half-seen out the corner of my eye. An asrai night, all right, the kind of night when white mist hangs like a shroud and the lands of Faerie are supposed to draw closer, when ancient gateways open for those who move between the worlds.

Pa, too, was affected by it. The queer glow seemed to worry him, though he didn't say anything all the way out to Jake Sullivan's farm.

A sneaky devil, Jake. He keeps his 'still on an island out there in the middle of Black Lake, government land, so it doesn't matter if it's found. They can confiscate the 'still, but they can't get Jake, because they can't even prove it's his, unless they catch him working it.

We got down to the lake at a quarter past ten.

It was totally silent, the water as quiet and black as your grandfather's grave. The mist hung a bare inch above the smooth surface. You couldn't see anything six feet away.

The two of us were quiet too. Climbing into Jake's old, weather-beaten boat, we poled our way free of the cattails. The boat leaked, but not dangerously so long as you kept your feet away from a board behind the

forward seat. Its worst fault was the stink of rotted fish that clung to the wood. You had to breathe through your mouth as you rowed.

That night, my father took the oars and motioned me to the bow. It was my job to keep a sharp lookout for lanterns, in case the revenuers wandered by.

I was thinking of them, of the warning I'd had from Gram, of how much she hated Pa. Enough, I was thinking, to do almost anything, especially since she'd gotten pregnant. But would she go *that* far, to give us away?

I wasn't worried for myself. The law goes easy on minors, especially when they get dragged into things by their parents. I knew I'd get no more than a few days in jail and probation. Pa, though...

Three-time losers go to prison, and men in prison, especially men with *appetites*...

I shook my head to clear it, shaking chilled droplets of mist from my hair. I was so het up, I nearly missed the splash of something struggling in the water.

I thought it was a fish at first, a bass maybe, trapped in a poacher's gill net, but we were too far out now, nearly halfway across the lake where nets were hard to anchor and harder to hide.

The splashing came again, louder, nearer. I whispered a quick word of warning to Pa.

He stopped rowing. We both sat still, listening. For a moment, there was only the steady dripping of water from the oars, and I began to doubt my ears, but then it came again. Something thrashing and slapping the glassy water. Something large, a little way ahead of us and left.

My father reached under his jacket and pulled out an old Colt revolver wrapped in oilcloth. He laid the bundle on the seat and opened it so that the weapon lay ready to hand. Then he pulled the gaff from under the seats and handed it to me.

He was hoping for a bonus on the night's work. An otter, perhaps, with a fur he could sell for a nice quiet profit.

He gripped the oars again and slowly, quietly pulled us toward the frantic flapping sounds.

It was large, all right. Playing the lantern's beam across it, I guessed it was a good five feet in length, though I couldn't make out its shape between the black water and the skittering light. The critter was caught

in a tangle of water weed, that and a section of fish-net, the small-meshed kind some folks use for hand-seining shad.

It heard us coming and fought all the harder to free itself, but the thing was plainly hopeless. At last it lay back, floating on the surface, gasping for breath.

The boat pulled alongside, Pa motioning for me to be ready to gaff it, but when I saw the thing up close, I nearly dropped the pole instead. The critter in the net was neither bird nor fish, but a woman. My God, such a woman I'd never laid eyes on.

The breath gusted out of me. I sat there, stunned by the sight of her long, white legs, and then by the force of my body's reaction, stronger than anything I'd ever felt before, stronger even than Jean had called up with the touch of her slender hand.

"Hey! Give me that!" Pa snapped.

He snatched the gaff away from me and carefully hooked a tattered corner of the net. He pulled her up next to the boat, then snarled at me again when I still didn't move.

The two of us reached over the side and took hold. One good heave was all it needed. She weighed almost nothing. For some reason, I was afraid to lay hands on her, I don't know why. The ghostly mist, or my Gram's fairy tales.

Whatever, I had an idea my hands might pass right through her, so at my end I was careful to grab only fish net.

Pa wasn't so shy. He took hold of her under the shoulders and pulled her on up and let her flop into the boat. Then he took the lantern from me and turned its narrow beam on her, and he sucked air too.

She was white all over, milk white, bone white. Her hair was the purest silver color, falling about her shoulders in a glorious gleaming mane despite the water. Her skin was the color of sunrise on a clear winter's day, so pale it seemed transparent, living glass. Her face was a small white triangle framing a tiny flawless mouth and two enormous watchful moonglow eyes.

She was fine-boned as a meadowlark and delicate as porcelain, perfectly formed, as we could plainly see for she wore nothing at all but a filigreed bracelet of silver, set with white shimmery stones and engraved with lines of curious Arab-looking stuff.

The feyness of her set my heart racing. I found myself clutching the sides of the boat with a dangerous grip, and I forced myself to let go for fear of breaking the rotten wood, and drowning us all.

Pa recovered faster. He set the lantern on the seat beside him so that its beam cut across her, toward me, and he reached out and brushed a stray lock of the silvery hair from her eyes. She didn't react, but lay there quietly.

He gained something from her inertia. Taking his knife out, he started to cut away the constricting net and the weeds. Still she did nothing, but shrank from the wide steel blade in his hand.

I helped pull the strands of cord away from her, one by one, and as I worked her hair fell down and brushed against the back of my left hand. A tingling shock made me jerk it away as though I had touched a hot wire, and rub it as much as I liked, the tingle didn't fade away. It added something, somehow, to the enormous knot in my groin.

Had she stung me, I wondered? My father had seemed to feel nothing, and yet he had touched her and held her, like I hadn't dared to.

But the lady paid no mind to me. Her gaze was locked on my father, on the steel blade he was using, making me think again of Gram's stories, something about cold iron's power.

Even her bracelet would fade away, losing its sparkle whenever the knife came near.

Pa grunted once as the last strands of netting came loose. I glanced up to see a familiar light dance in his eyes. Oh no, I thought, though I admit what I felt was more nearly a flare of hot jealousy than the sick, wrenching disgust I had felt over Annabel Franklin.

Confused, afraid of my own emotions, I did nothing either way, but sat there, thinking, Not her. You can't.

I looked away, toward the enclosing mist, but there was no help to be found there, only a sense of eeriness, as though we were all being watched, and judged, by something unseen and far older than men.

I was moved by an almost religious awe, by an urge not to taste, but to worship.

And though I'd accepted, unwillingly, everything else that Pa'd done, the thought of his touching this woman, this...creature, defiling her, soiling her, suddenly that was unbearable.

Still she didn't move, not to cover herself or even brush away the wet weed that still clung to her skin. She watched my father intently, and after a minute or so of this, I saw him smile the old familiar smile, the one that Annabel had known so well that very morning.

He knelt beside her, close, the damp air growing colder, musky, unbreathable. As the Macklin gift began to flow, he slowly stroked her silver hair. It fell in undulating waves down over her shoulders and onto her breasts, and trailed below her narrow waist, and his hands traveled over the full shining length of it. As his dark fingers began to move over her perfect white skin, I waited breathlessly for some reaction. Surely she would never accept such a thing from a mortal man...

But she did nothing. She pulled away once from the knife he still held, her white eyes glowing with strong, unspoken emotion. Was it rage...or desire?

There was no hint of the glazed look I had seen so many times with other women. Instead, I was suddenly struck by the likeness of her eyes to his. Black and white, both glimmering, like opposite sides of the same coin, a queer kinship that left me stunned, and trembling with nameless fear. The infamous Macklin line, I thought, choking — just where *did* its roots lie?

Suddenly, I knew Pa was making a monstrous mistake — this time he'd go too far, crossing a different kind of line.

I thought to warn him, afraid of the thing that he might have already let loose way out here on the lake, and me with no hope of escape and no place I could run to, but then all the words and the panic got caught in my throat. A croaking "Don't!" was all I could manage.

I watched helplessly as he smiled and his hand moved to cup one flawless breast. His fingers slowly traced a circle around the pale nipple and then began to squeeze soft flesh. She gasped at this and raised one hand, to ward him off or to tease him, to snare him a little bit deeper...I still don't know. I watched the bracelet shimmer once in the lantern light but his other hand rose too and brushed her arm with the knife. She cried out softly, the first sound she had made, a sound like the cry of a loon on a warmer night, inhuman, full of suffering and sadness.

"So," he breathed. "What are you, girl, that you're afraid of this, but not of me?"

He passed the knife across her face, the flat of the blade just grazing her cheek, and she cried out again, angry this time, closing her eyes and turning away.

My father grinned, a devil's leer, with a hard cold joy in it I'd never seen before. It froze my heart. Then he seized her hair and pulled her head back, forcing his mouth down on hers in cold lascivious invasion while the blade stayed ever at her throat.

I watched, paralyzed, as he went on. His mouth moved over her neck and shoulders like a hungry, blinded snake, and he nipped her flesh between huge yellow teeth, sucking avidly as he came back again to her breasts.

He was panting now, his breath a trail of smoke in the cold damp air, and his hand left her just for a moment to tear at his clothing. Then his greatest weapon was freed, rising up like a viper from its nest.

"Pa, no, please!" I begged.

"Wait your turn!" he snarled and used the knife like a magic wand. Just the threat of its touch was enough to part her thighs. Then he was on her, plunging and snarling, savage as a rabid dog.

She mewed once, the moment he entered her, and that tiny kitten's cry was enough, at last, to break through my paralysis. I shouted as I leaped onto his back.

The flat-bottomed boat rocked madly beneath us, but didn't turn over. He shouted once and flung me off with a single sweep of his arm, throwing me backward onto the point of the bow so hard that it nearly broke my spine. The wind burst out of my lungs and it seemed to take a hundred years to pull myself back into the boat, to suck air back into my burning chest.

Pa pumped away, barely distracted by my assault. I caught a single flash of the lady's eyes, enormous, flaming.

She was making more soft, mewling sounds of pain in time to my father's hard bestial grunts. It scraped at my very soul to hear her, she who deserved soft silk and incense. So I took the gaff and I lifted its blunt end. A wordless shout of anger burst free as I brought it down, square across his shoulders.

It struck with a dull, echoing whack and shivered in my hands. He roared with anger and surprise but I hit him a second time before he managed to pull free and turn on me.

"God damn you, boy!" he bellowed. He dropped the knife to seize the pistol, still lying on the other seat, and brought it to bear on my chest.

"Pa! No!" I cried, sweeping the gaff sideways. The butt end hit his wrist first, then the gun.

It exploded in my face, a searing blast of sound and light that blew my ears back and pulled the skin taut across my forehead, deafening me. Something stitched a line of fire across my left eyebrow before flying into the darkness beyond.

The pistol followed, kicked from his hand by the gaff and the shot he'd fired. He recovered quickly, though, and grabbed the gaff. He jerked it out of my nerveless hands and used it like a quarterstaff, bringing it in underneath my arm to thump me hard in the ribs. Then the other end came around to catch me just as hard in the belly. I folded up, falling back against the bow, and looked up in horror to see the gaff coming back down again.

I flung my arms up over my head. The pole struck the left one first, below the elbow, and there was a dull double crack as the bones gave way.

I screamed and the gaff came down again. My arm once more took the worst of it but this time the hook got me, hitting me high on the forehead, slicing downward. The metal point ripped through skin and muscle alike, scoring skull-bone, and skipped off the already bloodied point of my brow. Missing my eye, it nicked my jaw and the hook embedded itself in the fleshy part of my shoulder.

"Lady!" I cried. "Help me! Please!"

Pa snarled, his black eyes gleaming in the mist. Heaving backward, he tore the hook out of me, hefting the gaff like a harpoon, aiming.

Behind him, the lady moved at last. She rose and whispered a word, a strange word, alien, twisting itself in my ear like an angry snake. Then it vanished, swallowed up in a sun-bright flash of coruscating color, turquoise and amber and jade green, as she brought the bracelet up between his legs. A jagged blast of light erupted from that brutal contact, light that framed my father's shock and agony, moon-white light that clearly showed his body's wracking, spasmic response, not the shrieking collapse I'd expected, but more a frantic, endless consummation, thrusting blindly at the dark, as though he were trying to seed the mist itself, the futile effort shaking him from head to toe and back again.

At last the wrenching spasms slowed, became a rhythmic shiver...stopped.

For a moment he stood like a statue, a stone-cast hero, all his weapons at the ready. Then the gaff slipped from his hands and he did collapse, in a sodden heap. His arm knocked the lantern overboard and there followed a moment of darkness, and a rocking splash as the lady followed.

"Thank you," I whispered, and fainted.



WHEN I OPENED MY EYES again, I was staring up into the jowly face of a middle-aged deputy sheriff. "Take it easy, son," he said, his feet widespread in the prow of a shiny white motorboat.

Beyond him was a third boat, full of overcoated revenueurs. Overhead, the sky was the pearly pinkish-red of dawn. The moon had set. The mist had lifted. The lake itself had become no more than gray and glassy water.

"My...my Pa?" I asked.

He nodded to his left, but I was nearly blinded by a sheet of clotted blood that covered my face and shoulder. My left arm was a throbbing agony. I peered at a heap of rags piled in the boat's middle, not really seeing the man-shape at first.

"Pa?" I asked softly.

He didn't answer. He lay the way he'd fallen, long legs doubled under him, his manhood exposed, looking shrunken and old in the morning light. Only the wild, white rolling of his eyeballs said he'd heard me.

His feet twitched, kicking dangerously at the rotten hull. He tried to rise, to shift himself, but his hands couldn't take any hold and he fell back again, making desperate animal sounds of distress. His lips hung slack and a thick rope of drool hung across his chin.

I stared at him, awestruck. How could a burst of colored light have reduced a man to this?

Again, I thought of Gram's fairy tales, about the tricks the asrai play on poor, innocent fishermen. A wildflower of hope sprang up, blossoming in me. I tried one more time to sit up, but I only succeeded in banging my arm, and I passed out again.

The next time I woke up in a hospital.



I remember a fuzzy time of questions and peering faces, the whole world rippling around me, and then, finally, a warm dry bed and gentle hands. Later, there were queer smells and needles and another black void while my broken bones were set and plastered.

Afterward, things gradually improved. Within a week, my arm had healed enough that it only ached and my shoulder began to itch viciously. I insisted on being let out of bed, over loud protests from Mother and Gram. Pretty soon, I began to feel human again, though my plastered arm rides in a sling.

Pa wasn't so lucky.

He never recovered from whatever struck him down that night. He's bedridden, helpless, a drooling invalid gripped by periodic, vaguely rhythmic convulsions, by rather amazing emissions. Dr. Tomlin told Mother he'd had a stroke, and that she shouldn't hope for improvement.

Dad could live for years yet, given proper care, Doc said, but he'll never be much better off than he is right now, his hips and hands paralyzed, his face reduced to a limp rag of flesh. And as Doc gently put it, he'll never be a husband to her again, nor to anyone else.

When I told him about the white lady, he talked about fever, concussion, exposure, and shock. All my arguing only convinced him the more, so I learned to keep quiet about it.

Eventually, I took over my father's rounds. The business is not what it was, but with Ricky to help me, I started again with the endless circle of docks and lanes and houses.

Some look at me sideways, but others have told me a father who'd do any such thing to a son deserved what he got, an attitude even my sister Christine has adopted.

At home, it's different too. Mother's not sick anymore, and Gram's no longer silent. Once or twice, I've seen them smiling together, chuckling after they've tended to Pa, though what goes on there, I can't say. Pa gets wild-eyed and frantic at the sight of me, so I never go into his room anymore.

We've all fallen into new patterns, an attitude fulfilled by the easy birth of Gram's baby girl, my half-sister. Irene they named her, for the peace she brought us. Looking at her tiny wrinkled face, and the smiles on the rest of them, I told myself that our troubles were over, and guided the

little ones to bed with a glimmering candle. One day soon, I promised them, we'd have electric wires and lights and live like other people. My father's resistance to new-fangled gadgets was gone with his tongue. He could no longer force us to live in the past. We'd have a telephone, even a radio.

They giggled at me, but I could see the dream shine in their eyes as we slipped into nightshirts and climbed into bed, the three of us still sharing a single room and the single, dusty-smelling feather bed, like always. In minutes we were warm as toast and dozing off to a sound sleep.

I don't know what woke me.

A dream, or a voice, or a strange noise. Sometimes the roof creaks in the wind.

I don't know. I only know that I came wide awake with a start and found myself lying on my side. My little sister was snuggled up against me, her back to my belly. She was snoring in light little puffs.

My good arm was laid across her shoulder, half out from under the covers. Absently, I began to stroke her long black silky hair. She stirred and flung her head back against me, and then I was stroking her face. Her neck and shoulder. Her childish breast.

An eerie heat began to burn in my brain. Something wild and willful and older than God himself, I think. It scudded through my veins with each beat of my heart and it carried that pulsing fire through every part of my body. I felt myself quicken and slid under, panting, overwhelmed, before I had any faintest idea of resisting.

I moved away from Christine so as to turn her toward me, to pull up her nightshirt and fondle her innocence. In the pale moonlight, I saw her eyes open, saw the puzzled look she gave me.

Then the heat seemed to wash over her too.

Her mouth opened. Her eyes glazed over. She wriggled closer to me. I swear, it was her tiny hands that pulled up my nightshirt, searching till they closed on the swollen evidence of my fever.

We stroked each other then, while my mouth closed on hers, and I knew it was wrong. I knew, and I ordered my hands to be still, commanding my body to stop, to pull away from her, to do anything at all but continue this dizzy descent into madness.

All in vain.

Her small hands teased at me with instinctive skill and I responded like an animal in rut while my soul grew cold in terror. I felt possessed by something superhuman, a primeval goatishness that laughed at the laws of men.

She moaned, and I pulled her beneath me. Her slender legs wrapped themselves around me without any urging and then I was pushing, pushing. Deep inside her, something gave way with a rush of warmth and I lost all control. Bucking, I trumpeted like a stallion in triumph. For that endless moment I was not human at all. I was a stag, a bull, a heaving, battering convulsion of mindless desire.

It went on and on, sensations building on each other until it seemed the whole world must burst into flame. At last, when I thought my heart would give way, there came shuddering release. I screamed aloud, and it was over.

For a moment I was boneless, the sweat pouring out of my body, a spent weakness holding every muscle in thrall. It took tremendous effort to pull myself away from Christine. She lay limp, unmoving in the depths of the bed, her dark eyes staring upward.

Oh God, I thought. I've killed her.

But no, she was breathing. I turned back the comforter and there on the sheet saw the dark spreading stain of corruption that had claimed me.

At a soft sound, I looked up to meet Ricky's gaze. His eyes are black too, like mine, and in them I saw mirrored all the hatred and revulsion I'd so lately felt for Pa.

"Bastard!" he whispered.

Then the door slammed open and I saw by flickering candle light the horrified faces of Gram and my mother.

Tonight the moon is full again somewhere above, and a ghostly white mist hides the lake. I sit on a sandspit along the southern shore, watching the fog as it gathers and thickens

In the hours since twilight, its color has shifted from sickly gray to glistening pearly white where the light from my lantern touches it. Perhaps I should put it out. I have no way of knowing whether or not my lady of the mist will take offense. I can only sit on the damp sand and whisper my plea to the darkness.

Come to me, Lady.

Can you hear me? I won't hurt you. I'm your friend.

I'm the one who saved you from John Macklin. Can you see the plaster on my arm, the scars in my flesh? Marks of honor earned when I fought him, for your sake.

Please, I mean no harm. I've come to beg a favor from you. The smallest gift, nothing, really. If you want, you can think of it as a reward for services rendered.

Please, Lady.

Please understand.

I am my father's son. I'm a true Macklin. I proved it with my sister last night and I can't stand it. I can't bear the thought of becoming a man like my father. An ugly man. A beast.

And I'm asking such a small thing. Just a touch. One feather touch of your asrai hand, your silver hair. Surely you know my need. The three smaller fingers on my left hand are still numb, lifeless where they brushed your hair that night, when we pulled you from the lake.

My father touched you too, and you made him a neutered ruin. You ended forever his age of evil. Can't you lend me an ounce of the same sweet justice?

Come to me, Lady.

Touch me. Take away this thing, this horror that stains everything I love. Help me now or I'm doomed. Short of killing myself, I know only one other way to stop it.

I hear no answer but I'll sit here and listen all night if I have to. I've been sitting here forever already, fingering my father's sharpest knife, waiting for you to rise from the water.

How I long to see those silky silvery tresses, the ivory skin, and the moonstone eyes of my Lady.

Please. If you don't come, I'm not sure I have the strength to do what I must.

The knife is cold as death in my hands and I am so afraid.



*Weird hats, strange noises, odd hours—magic is weird, but it has nothing on dating rituals.*

# Why I Never Went Steady with Heather Moon

*By Ron Goulart*

**I**T WAS ABOUT THE TIME that the third large fire-spitting demon came spilling out of the bathtub that I decided to capitulate. Dodging the scaly

green creature's sticky coiling tentacles, and making a rush past the second demon, who was crouched on the toilet seat and bellowing out noise and sooty yellow smoke, I dashed into the small living room of my apartment.

My neighbor on the left was pounding on the wall with the ferrule of his cane. "Do you know what time it is, young man?"

"Midnight?" I guessed.

These particular supernatural manifestations usually showed up some time around the witching hour.

The initial demon, who was covered with blood-splattered feathers and seemed to have several toothy mouths, was now crouched on the sofa and eating one of the faded cushions.

"C'mon, don't do that. I'm having a hell of a time explaining all this stuff to the landlord as it is."

The demon wolfed down the entire cushion, then made a nasty roaring sound.

My neighbor on the other side smacked the wall with a rolled up magazine. "Turn down that TV show, Harkins."

"In a minute. Sorry."

I made a shushing gesture at the demon and pointed at the phone. "You guys win. I'm calling him now."

The feathery demon snatched a coaster off my lopsided coffee table and ate that.

Taking up the phone, very gingerly since it was resting on the far end of the same coffee table, I dialed the number of Professor Matthew Krouch.

The telephone rang five times before he, feigning a drowsy voice, answered, "Krouch here."

"Skip the acting, professor," I said, keeping an eye on the nearest demon. The other two had, as far as I could determine, remained in the john. "This is Will Harkins."

"Who? Calling me at such an ungodly hour is — "

"I give up. I quit. I concede," I informed him, sadness, weariness and quite a bit of anger sounding in my voice. "She's all yours."

"Whatever are you babbling about, Harkins?"

"About Sue Smith," I told him. "I'll stop dating her. She's yours exclusively."

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about. Is this some undergraduate prank, my boy?"

"Just call them off — the demons and all the other crap."

"Whatever drug you're on, Harkins, I suggest you make a serious effort to sober up." He slammed down the phone.

The demon on the sofa gave off a faint popping sound before vanishing.

I moved, very carefully, to the bathroom and chanced a look. I was pretty sure those other two would be gone as well and they were. Although the fuzzy pink cover on the toilet seat had a burned spot where the demon had been perched.

I was free, yet far from happy. I had, out of fear and cowardice, just given up the only woman I'd ever truly loved so far in my life.

This was some years back, I was not quite twenty-one, and the idea of losing Sue Smith for good and all seemed enormously important to me.

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The next day, an autumn Wednesday, while completely free of demons and other chilling supernatural manifestations, was not especially happy for me. For one thing, because of the psychic occurrences of the night before, I hadn't been able to study for the quiz in Political Theory 22A and my paper on "Tap-dancing in the Movies" for Pop Culture 11B came in at just over a page and a half. A good three and a half short of the minimum length. Worst of all I had to phone Sue at the Gamma Epsilon sorority house and tell her I'd decided to devote myself to my studies and couldn't see her anymore. She cried, which almost tempted me to go on defying Professor Krouch and his black magic. But I already knew it would be impossible to go on dating her and so I didn't weaken. I was, however, sniffing slightly when I stepped out of the phone booth in Wally's Pub.

I'd postponed phoning until nearly five in the afternoon. So I was able to walk directly from the phone to a table at the far side of the sawdusted floor and join Nat Weinbaum.

At the time — this was my senior year at Brimstone University in Brimstone, Connecticut — Nat was, even though we weren't in the same fraternity, my closest friend. And he knew quite a bit about what I'd been suffering through the past two weeks.

He wasn't at all sympathetic, though. "You're a shmuck," he observed after I'd outlined what I'd done.

"For giving up Sue? It is a hell of a sacrifice, yeah, but — "

"No, she's a typical whey-faced adolescent with a brain the size of a prune pit." Nat picked up his beer glass. "Sue you're well rid of. What I meant was — "

"Wait now, Nat. My relationship with Sue was something special that — "

"Not all that special. You're the third guy she's gone with this semester and it's only October."

"Look, that's because Krouch — "

"The reason you're a shmuck, Will, is that you gave in to him. Now the bastard'll send critters after you every time he — "

"Nope, it had to do with Sue entirely," I said. "He made that clear when he called me into his office at the start of all this."

"There's another thing to contemplate, old buddy. Why, if you two

were such an exceptional team, has Sue also been seeing an aging prof of English?"

"I've already explained that to you."

"No, you simply recited her feeble excuse for —"

"She's majoring in English and — well, Krouch implied that if she didn't date him fairly regularly, she'd find that her grades and her —"

"A word to the dean on her part would halt that."

"Nobody'd believe the guy is practicing sorcery just on her word. I didn't believe it myself when he told me he didn't want anybody else dating her," I said. "Besides, Nat, she's afraid to make a fuss. That's why she keeps going out with him."

"Myself, I'd be extremely ticked off if Bev dated one of her professors."

"Few rational people, in my opinion, would risk all the grief and loss of self esteem that's involved in dating your girl. Even a fire-breathing demon would think twice before —"

"Did Krouch send more of those after you?"

I held up some fingers. "Three last night."

"That's four."

"I'm rattled." I took a sip of my beer. "This has been a rough day."

"How's it taste?"

"Hum?"

"The beer — how does it taste?"

"Fine, not like brine anymore."

Nat rested both elbows on the table top. "There are, you know, ways to counter the sorts of spells he's been using on you. You could stand up to him, fight him."

"No, nope. Not me. It's over and done. My heart is broken, sure, and my social life's in ruins, but there won't be any more huge foul-smelling, and usually noisy, creatures from the nether regions carousing in my damn apartment at all hours and causing old Mr. Reisberson to whap the wall with his cane. My food will no longer taste like week old garbage, or fraternity chow, and my beers will no longer taste like polluted sea water and every time I try to drink a Coke, there won't be a toad in it or —"

"I still think you should've complained to Coke about the toads. It may not have been part of one of the spells, since a cousin of mine in Philadelphia once found a mouse in his Pepsi."



"Furthermore, my papers won't burn away to ashes before I can turn them in. The pages of my text books won't wither to dust or become so splotted with blood that I can't read them. All in all, Nat, I shall, from now on, lead a normal life." Sighing, I drank some more of my beer. "But, damn it, I'm really going to miss Sue."

When he leaned back in his chair, it creaked. "So who are you going to take to your fraternity dance this Saturday?"

"Hell, I forgot about that," I admitted. "I'm on the cleanup committee, too. Be ironic if I went to the dance alone."

"Maybe you should sign up for one of Krouch's English classes. Find out what irony really is," he advised. "It happens I can fix you up."

"With who? Not that friend of Bev's who's on the fencing team?"

"Someone else entirely."

"No, I don't think so."

"She's very pretty. Has auburn hair and a delicate tracing of freckles across the bridge of her nose."

"Here I've been forced to end, after being dogged by demons and plagued by the machinations of a professor with a command of powerful sorcery, a deep and meaningful relationship with Sue Smith." I frowned at him. "And you attempt to console me with someone who's merely pretty."

Nat gazed up at the ceiling for a moment. "You didn't happen, during your recent supernatural dealings, to sell your sense of humor to the devil or something?"

"No, but there are certain things I'm serious about, Nat. My feelings for Sue are —"

"Sue's over and you need a date," he reminded. "This girl's name is Heather Moon. She's eighteen and —"

"A kid. I don't —"

"She's a junior already."

"Then she'll be too smart. Smart women always try to minimize my...Wait." I sat up straight. "Heather Moon, Heather Moon. I've heard of her. Yeah, she's supposed to be weird and strange, doesn't even belong to a sorority, has few if any friends. A loner and an outcast." I nodded, remembering some of what I'd heard about her. "No, Nat, even auburn hair and freckles and a topseeded brain won't make up for —"

"Who else then?"

After thinking that over for a few seconds, I answered, "Nobody else really."

"Trust me, Heather is the woman for you."

I asked, "Where's she live?"

"Over in New Beckford with her parents."

"Jesus."

Nat hunched his shoulders and looked directly at me. "We're buddies, right?"

"Sure."

"Meet this woman, let her befriend you."

"You make it sound therapeutic."

"It well could be."

I narrowed my left eye and scanned his seemingly innocent face. "There's something about Heather Moon you're not telling me. Isn't there?"

"There's a whole hell of a lot I'm not telling you."

"Oh, what the heck," I said. "Set it up if you can."

He could and he did.

**T**HE WINDSHIELD wipers on my car weren't quite up to the task of keeping my window clear and I was having to drive fairly slowly up the twisting hillside road that led to Heather Moon's family homestead. I'd taken a few wrong turnings, too, and was already about fifteen minutes late.

Back then the town of New Beckford wasn't the thriving commuter community it is today and in the frequent flashes of crackling blue lightning I saw mostly woodlands and wild fields outside in the rainswept night. Off to the right, when I finally reached the crest of the road, I spotted the high wrought iron fence that Heather had described to me when I'd talked to her on the phone a few days earlier.

Up to this point I hadn't seen her in person, although Nat had pointed her out to me in a blurred group photo of the Chess Club in last year's yearbook.

The fence was leaning at odd angles and the gate itself had long since fallen away. The house sat at the end of a long curved white gravel drive.

It was an immense Victorian mansion, thick with spires, cupolas and gables. I got the impression, during an especially brilliant smack of lightning, that several large dark birds were roosting, hunch-shouldered, on the apex of one of the steeply slanting shingled roofs.

I parked in front of the three-car garage, nudged my door open and made a dash for the front door. As I sprinted by the garages lightning flashed inside them, a dazzling yellow-green illumination that briefly lit up the tiny dusty windows. There may also have been a series of chugging, thumping sounds.

The big carved-oak door to the house swung open as my foot hit the top step.

"Come in, Mr. Harkins," someone invited.

In the long dimlit hall I encountered a middle-aged woman, blonde, wearing a strawberry-pattern apron over a black cocktail dress. I said, "I'm here to pick up —"

"You should have turned *left* on Willow Branch Road," she said, smiling. "I'm Heather's mother."

"Left?" I tried to figure out how she knew I'd taken a wrong turning some three miles downhill from here.

"And don't confuse *Old* Gallows Tree Road with just plain Gallows Tree Road," she added. "Would you like a cup of cocoa?"

"No, I'm sort of late already and —"

"I shouldn't have told Heather you'd be twenty minutes late. She has a habit of dawdling anyway and —"

"How'd you know I was going to —"

"You can wait for her in the parlor." Smiling, Mrs. Moon beckoned me to follow her into a large, cluttered room on the left.

As I crossed the threshold I tripped over something soft, nearly falling. I looked back but didn't spot anything on the floor.

"Buddy!" Mrs. Moon was scowling at a spot near my feet. "What did I tell you about that? Get to your room."

I heard a snort, a giggle, and then light footsteps going away.

"He's eleven," explained Heather's mother. "A difficult age for boys."

"Um," I was able to say.

She came over to me and patted my arm. "I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't mention Buddy to anyone at your school," she requested.

"Heather, through no fault of her own, isn't as popular as I'd like her to be. She won't allow me, because of her stubborn streak, to cast a...Well, enough of our little family problems, Mr. Harkins. Tell me something about yourself."

I glanced over at the doorway. "What exactly is Buddy's problem?"

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with the boy. He's just at an age when he considers it funny to turn invisible."

"A phase, huh?"

"I hope so. I'd be disappointed if he settles on invisibility as his lifetime knack and...oh, my. Here comes Grandpa Plum."

I turned in the direction of her stare and saw a lean old man with a great deal of wispy white hair. He was wearing a rumpled gray suit, had his hands folded across his chest and was floating, face up, about three feet off the floor.

He came drifting slowly into the room and stopped with his polished black pumps nearly touching my midsection.

"One of his trances," explained Heather's mother in a whisper.

"Will Harkins," spoke the floating old man in a strange piping voice. I noticed now that his eyes were tightly shut.

"It's Little Leroy," Mrs. Moon said to me.

"Little who?"

"Little Leroy, his control — that's who's talking through Gramps now. You're too young to remember Little Leroy, a popular child star in the early days of talking pictures. Died young in a tragic yachting accident, though why anybody would allow an eight-year-old child to have a yacht of his own is something only a Hollywood parent — "

"Will Harkins," came Little Leroy's voice through Grandpa Plum's lips, "you are in dire danger."

"Me?"

"It isn't over, you know," warned the childish voice. "Krouch is committed to the dark powers and the dread teachings of the infamous Count Monstrodamus. Even though you played chickenshit and gave in to — "

"Language, Leroy dear, language," cautioned Mrs. Moon.

"You are still in danger of being consumed by the foul fiends of the netherworld."

"Darn it, Grandfather, what the heck are you up to?" inquired a pleasant female voice from the hallway.

"Eh? What's that, child?" Shaking his head, which made the white hair flutter, he opened his eyes, came out of his trance, and fell to the floor with an impressive thunk.

"You have to waken him gradually from his trances, Heather dear, remember?" Mrs. Moon knelt beside the sprawled old man. "I think he bopped his poor head and passed out cold."

"Boy, what a great start for our first date." Shrugging and then smiling, Heather walked gracefully into the room and held out her hand to me.

She was slim and auburn-haired, with that trace of freckles. And she was — well, if I hadn't still been mourning the loss of Sue Smith, I would have fallen immediately in love with Heather right there in the Moon parlor.

"I'm Will," I said, shaking hands. "You look great."

"Yes, I know. But thanks for noticing."

"Harkins." Her grandfather was stretched out on the floor, though awake now. "I overheard some of what Little Leroy told you. You'd do well to heed his advice, lad."

"I'm not certain exactly what he —"

"Lay off Will, Grandfather." Heather caught hold of my nearest hand.

"C'mon, we're already late for the dance."

"Nice meeting you, Mrs. Moon," I said. "You as well, sir. If you need any help getting up off the floor, I can —"

"He doesn't." Heather escorted me out into the hall.

"They're right about Professor Krouch," I mentioned as we stepped out into the rainy night.

"Of course," she said, "but I can take care of that for you."

The fraternity dance was held at the Shoreline Country Club in Northport — that's old Shoreline, the one they tore down about ten years or so ago. A sprawling place that looked like the offspring of a mating between an English inn and a Hollywood mortuary. On the hazardous drive from Heather's hilltop home to the shores of the Sound I refrained from talking about her unusual family. She didn't discuss them either, nor

did she repeat her offer to protect me from any possible further assaults from Professor Krouch.

For the most part Heather made a favorable impression on my fraternity brothers and their sorority girl dates. Beyond a few veiled sneers and a scattering of snide whispers, we got through the first hour of the thing with no problems.

And fortunately, nobody witnessed the Doug Mittler incident except me.

I'd gone to the john, leaving Heather alone out on the terrace. There was a canvas awning over it and the rain was slamming down hard.

Doug, a football jock, was a huge blond fellow struggling through his third semester as a senior. I'd noticed him eying Heather a couple of times earlier in the evening and smirking, but I'd assumed he was amused to see me, a fraternity brother he loathed, stuck with a date who, though strikingly pretty, had a reputation for being very odd.

But that wasn't quite how he saw things and, soon as he noticed my leaving her, he ditched his date and attempted to get better acquainted with Heather.

I returned to the terrace just as he was trying to slip his big right hand down into the front of her dress.

Not flinching, she simply snapped her thumb and middle finger together.

There came a strange hollow humming sound and then Doug started to rise up off the flagstones. His arms flapped down to his sides and he shot swiftly upward. Just missing the awning, he sailed out in an arc into the rainy darkness beyond.

Doug fell to the ground about a hundred yards from us, landing on the wet grass just short of the high Sound side hedges.

"I really don't like to be pawed." Heather took hold of my hand. "I think we best leave, before I embarrass you in front of your friends."

"Most of them are fraternity brothers, not friends," I told her as we stepped back inside. "You know, I've always wanted to do that to Doug. Well, not exactly that — since I'm not really sure what the hell *that* was."

"Simple telekinesis," she said. "I don't like to do that in public, but he got way too friendly."

I pointed a thumb in the direction he'd gone flying. "He's not seriously bunged up?"

"No, and he won't remember exactly what happened to him."

"What did happen?" We were making our way around the edge of the dance floor.

Heather sighed. "I suppose I'll have to explain this all to you."

"That's what's called for, yeah."

"Too bad, because I sort of like you and — taken with that show Gramps and Buddy put on — you probably won't want to have anything more to do with me."

"If it's something supernatural — well, it has to be, doesn't it? Anyhow, I'm used to that sort of stuff now, Heather, and you don't have to worry."

She smiled tentatively. "I think I will keep worrying. For a while, Will."

**T**HAT EVENING, parked on a dead end street that overlooked the stormy waters of the dark Sound, Heather told me something about herself and her unusual family. On her mother's side she could trace her ancestors back to a clan of sorcerers who had appeared in the mountain country of Hungary, rather abruptly according to certain ancient chronicles, sometime in the late 15th century. Heather's father was descended from a family that had flourished in England for more than a thousand years. They'd exhibited, over the centuries, a wide range of supernatural abilities, wild talents, and affinities for magic and sorcery. Some said the Moons were related in some way to Merlin and more than one of them had been labeled a witch or a warlock.

When the two strains had come together in Heather, Buddy, and an older brother, Andrew, who was away at college in California, they had produced some very exceptional offspring. Heather tried to lead as normal a life as possible but that wasn't particularly easy. Her parents and assorted relatives who lived with them — I was moderately unsettled to learn that there were still several residents of the hilltop mansion that I had yet to meet — didn't try as hard to hide their various magical abilities from people. That was one reason Heather didn't date much and was reluctant to have friends visit her at home.

"I decided to go out with you, originally, because Nat told me you were having some occult troubles," she said.

"Then I'm what to you — a charity case?"

"Well, I probably can help you," she told me. "And, basically, you're likable, Will."

I listened to the night rain hitting on the roof of my car for a few seconds. "Did Nat provide you with specifics?"

Heather nodded. "We've known about Matthew Krouch for some time," she answered. "My father's been kicking around the idea that we ought to do something about him."

"How drastic a something?"

She looked out into the stormy night. "You have to understand that Krouch practices black magic, the worst kind of sorcery," she said. "My family, on both sides, only uses its gifts for — this sounds corny, I guess, but only for good."

"I'll tell you," I said, "you folks may see this as a conflict between good and evil. But, even though I may have acted in a cowardly fashion, I'm glad I gave in to the professor. A couple weeks of demons and supernatural manifestations persuaded me I don't want to defy him any longer."

She reached over and, for only a moment, took hold of my hand. "Despite the element of carnival hokum involved in my grandfather's trances, most of his predictions are valid," she said. "You may not be free of Krouch yet."

"Why? He's got what he wants."

"What he wants at the moment." She withdrew her hand.

I said, "In the meantime I'd like to see you again."

"You would?"

"Yep, yeah. Is that a possibility?"

"Of course, sure," she answered, smiling. "Next time I can meet you on neutral ground. You won't have to risk coming to my place. Okay?"

The next two weeks came closer to being idyllic than any other stretch of time in my life. I saw Heather every day, not missing a one. We'd meet at the Student Glade — where the Computer Center stands now — as soon as our classes were over. We saw each other evenings, too, and did a lot of talking and wandering. We did go to a movie once — I no longer recall the title but I think it was probably a Western — and to a concert. Mostly, though, we were just together.



Eventually, too, there was a physical side to things, but I'd just as well not detail that.

I started to do better in my classes. After the demons laid off bothering me, I was able to pull up most of my grades from Ds and Cs to Bs. All in all, it was turning into a very satisfying and gratifying autumn.

Sue Smith and I shared no classes that semester, so I didn't encounter her. Once, I'm fairly certain, I saw her entering Truett Hall. She looked forlorn and, for only a moment, I thought of running over and comforting her. But I got control of myself in time.

I decided, as October moved toward its finish, to ask Heather to go steady. That was what you did back then — maybe they still do, I'm out of touch. I was even intending, though she didn't think much of fraternities, to offer her my pin.

To make the occasion more formal, I arranged to call for her at her home on that particular night. If we were going to have an officially permanent relationship, I figured I ought to quit giving the impression I was avoiding her strange family. I hadn't been back to the hilltop in New Beckford since our first date. Heather and I had been meeting in my apartment or on campus. I wasn't certain what means of transportation she used and, for some reason, I hadn't inquired.

It was a crisp, chill night and as I drove away from my apartment I noticed two small goblins and a tiny sheeted ghost moving along the sidewalk. Then I saw a plump woman with a flashlight following them through the growing twilight and remembered it was Halloween.

While I was driving up to the Moon mansion a sharp wind started blowing across the darkening night. Dry leaves came swirling free of the roadside trees and fell down across the beams of my headlights.

I was approximately a quarter mile from the top of the hill when the new demon manifested itself.

Bigger than any of the previous demons who'd visited me, it came rumbling out of a grassy field on my right. At least fifteen feet high, a luminous green in color, it was breathing a pale blue fire out over its multitude of sharp jagged teeth.

The thing planted itself in the night road directly in the path of my car. The wind carried a scatter of dead leaves against its body and each one burst into sparky flame upon touching that glowing green hide.

I swerved my car, drove along in a ditch for several hundred feet and then hopped back on the roadway, barreling past the creature. For a moment I thought I'd gotten myself clear, but then the demon reappeared up a hundred feet ahead of me.

Next my car died. Engine, radio, lights, everything ceased to function.

I assumed it would be my turn next.

The huge demon was, very slowly and deliberately, lumbering downhill toward me. Sparks came sputtering out of its glaring eyes each time it blinked. Halting a few yards from my front bumper, it pointed at me with one taloned hand and struck an Uncle-Sam-Wants-You pose.

I locked all my doors and hunkered low in the seat.

"Okay, fella, that'll be just about enough of that stuff."

I sat up, squinting out into the deepening dusk.

Another figure had materialized on the road near the demon. A human figure, a lean, tall man of about fifty. He wore a dark business suit and tie, but perched atop his head was a sorcerer's cap emblazoned with stars and moons and arcane symbols.

He held an ivory wand in his right hand, which he now aimed at the demon. "What did I just tell you? Scram, hit the road — ~~be~~gone!"

Scowling at him, the demon sent more sparks and flames shooting out of its eyes and mouth.

The man in the magic hat gestured with the wand, reciting some phrases I couldn't catch.

The creature bellowed in pain, sooty smoke came spiraling out of its ears. Bending over, it clutched at its luminous middle. Then came an enormous fiery explosion and the demon was replaced by darkness.

The man who'd dispatched it walked over to my side of the car. Tipping his sorcerer's hat, he said, "Evening, Will. I'm Heather's dad."

"Nice meeting you, Mr. Moon," I answered as I rolled down my window a few inches.

"That critter was sent to fetch you," he informed me. "It's lucky Grandpa Plum had a warning premonition."

"Sent by Professor Krouch?"

"Afraid so. Seems he's decided he wants to use you in a ritual."

I swallowed. "Oh, so?"

"We'll have to stop him," said Heather's father.

...

Heather turned to her uncle, giving a negative shake of her head. "Nobody wants a drink just now, Uncle Elroy."

"I wish you'd remember, my dear, to address me as the Amazing Marvelo in front of company." He was a plump man, clad in tux and turban, and was standing beside the large oaken table the rest of us were seated around. He clutched a large silvery pitcher in both hands. "My think-a-drink illusion is justly famed around the — "

"Sit or scram," advised Heather's father, who occupied the most ornately carved chair.

"I'll have a lemonade," said Mrs. Moon quietly. "And then you'll have to hush up, Marvelo."

Heather, sitting beside me, took my hand. "These family meetings usually get off to a slow start."

Her Aunt Electra, who sat directly across from us, gave a sudden startled yelp. Both of her much-ringed hands were holding a large crystal ball. "Something's coming in," she announced, lifting both palms clear of the globe.

It started to glow with a throbbing deep amber light. Then Professor Krouch appeared within the crystal. It was a full length image and I could see that his squat, broad-shouldered body was decked out in a long purplish robe that was plastered with mystic symbols and devices. On his bald head sat an odd three-cornered hat that sported a large shaggy horn at each corner.

"Looks like he's planning a sacrifice sure enough," observed Mr. Moon.

"Is it me he's intending to sacrifice?" I asked Heather quietly.

"That's what Grandfather's premonition told us. And it really looks as though he — "

"I intend to have you, Harkins," shouted Professor Krouch. "Nothing can save you. And most certainly not the feeble white magic of those nitwit Moons."

"Nitwits, are we?" muttered Aunt Electra, tapping the crystal with her forefinger.

I was about to ask Heather another pertinent question, but then I wasn't there any longer.

I rose up off my chair some three or four feet. Then I had the impression I was falling out a window. Not a regular window, but a strange window that had all at once opened in the middle of the air.

Heather cried out and tried to grab at me as I went rising up. But it did no good.

I went tumbling through the window into darkness. I felt as though I was riding in a very fast elevator, only going sideways rather than up or down.

After that I ceased to experience anything at all.

Someone was sobbing.

There was something familiar about the sound of it.

After swallowing some more smoky, incense-laden air, I opened my eyes. Sitting beside me in a highback, blackwood chair was Sue Smith. She was wearing jeans and a gray sweatshirt; her hands were folded in her lap.

"I'm not supposed to untie you, Will," she said in a small apologetic voice, sniffing. "Nor touch you even."

Unlike her, I was tied securely in my wooden chair, bound with rough shaggy ropes. "That's okay, Sue," I said. "How've you been?"

"Awful." She commenced sobbing again. "This is all my fault really...I've been dating him and trying to pretend I like him...but he suspects that I still...that I continue to be fond of you."

I'd been glancing around the room. It was large, high-ceilinged and stone-walled, and didn't seem to have any doors or windows. A huge pentagram had been scrawled in the middle of the stone floor in powdery greenish chalk and a half dozen five-foot-high brass candle holders circled the pentagram. Each had a thick black candle burning in it. Weighted down by the heavy clawfooted base of each holder was a sheet of ancient parchment. Written on the brittle sheets of old paper were lines in what I guessed was runic script.

But when Sue mentioned that she was still fond of me, I turned to stare at her. "Hey, that's very flattering, Sue."

"It's also pretty stupid, because it annoys the professor. He can sense somehow that I really don't much care for him and that I'm...thinking about you a lot...and it ticks him off considerably."

"What does he intend to do tonight?"

Her sobbing got going again. Finally she managed to say, "It's pretty terrible. I'm really sorry." Bringing both her hands up, she covered her face and cried.

"Um — can you give me some specifics, Sue?"

She lowered her hands away from her tearstained face. "Well, it's dreadful."

"I figured as much."

"Matt's gone completely around the bend and — "

"Matt?"

"He insists I call him that."

"Go on."

"He's nutty as a fruit salad and — "

"Fruit cake," I corrected.

"That, too. Anyway, he believes if he sacrifices you to some important demon or other, it'll make me love him forever."

"And this sacrifice — how exactly does that work?"

"It's going to involve that big star he drew on the floor," she explained, snuffling. "He spreadeagles you there, recites all sorts of weird gibberish and then he...this is the terrible part...he plunges a knife into you. I'm really sorry about all this."

"How come you know all the details?"

"He forced me to watch a dress rehearsal."

"Who'd he plunge the knife into during the rehearsal?"

"A watermelon."

"Flattering." Narrowing my left eye, I glanced from the pentagram to Sue's pale pretty face. "He's going to make you watch the real thing?"

My question caused her to sob some more. "Yes."

"You're not tied up," I pointed out.

"No, but I can't leave this chair or help you in any way."

"How come?"

With a very minimal nod of her blonde head she indicated a shadowy corner of the room. A large, heavy-looking wooden chest sat near the wall. "Behind that...there's lurking some kind of...I don't know exactly...a furry thing."

"And he told you it'd hurt you if you moved?"

"Tear me limb from limb."

I shook my head. "Nope, it seems unlikely he'd want to have you torn limb from limb, Sue," I told her. "You are, after all, the object of his ardor."

"That did occur to me, too," she admitted. "But the mood he's been in lately...I'm afraid to risk it, Will."

"How do you get in and out of this room?"

"There's a concealed door, over next to that chest the creature is squatting behind."

"If I can get over there, you know, maybe —"

"You'll never accomplish that, my boy." The stone door, with much rumbling and grating, had come sliding open and Professor Krouch, wearing the purple robe, crossed the threshold and stood smirking at me.

"Don't you think," I said, "that sacrificing the life of a registered student at the University of Brimstone may draw attention to you and possibly affect your tenure here?"

"Nobody will ever know what happened to you," he informed me as he walked over to stand just outside the large chalked pentagram.

The heavy stone door rolled shut behind him.

"The Moon family — and it's a large one — knows," I reminded him.

"Lunatics all," he responded with a chuckle. "No respectable person, least of all no official of this university, will believe the ravings of such disreputable people."

"There'll be the fact that I'm missing to corroborate what they say."

He chuckled again and adjusted his three-horned hat. "Ah, I see that you don't completely understand the sacrifice procedure."

"You're going to stick a knife in me. There's more?"

"The knife thrust doesn't kill you, my boy. It merely frees your spirit and that's what we sacrifice."

"I'm housing a spirit inside me?"

"You were like this when you took *Minor Victorian Novelists* 13A with me, Harkins," he said impatiently. "Slow to catch on. The mystic ritual I'm going to perform lets that spirit loose and that's what the demon I summon up is going to devour."

I relaxed slightly. "I won't be dead?"

"Oh, no. You'll be alive and able to function — some."

"Some?"

"When your vital spirit is consumed by a demon, it has a tendency, alas, to do some fairly serious damage to the husk that remains."

"I'm going to be a husk?"

"Yes, you'll be even less bright than you are now," he answered. "You'll be, let's be honest about this, a zombie for all practical purposes. Mindless, docile. Yet no one will ever be able to figure out precisely what happened to you. Eventually you'll simply be found in your shabby apartment and the assumption will be that you're one more unfortunate victim of a drug overdose. Suitable drug paraphernalia will be scattered about, by the way."

"Suppose this ritual doesn't work?"

"It'll work, never fear."

"I meant the other part of it. Suppose Sue still doesn't love you?"

"That can't happen, trust me. This is a foolproof spell, one of Count Monstrodamus' best," he assured me. "But, even assuming it didn't — Susan would still no doubt prefer me to the brainless clunk you'll be."

"She might at that."

Very slowly and deliberately, the professor began rolling up the sleeves of his robe. "Let's get on with this, shall we?"

Just as he said that I felt something tug at my left ear. I turned my head, but there was no one to be seen beside me. The mingled scents of peanut butter and perspiration hit my nostrils. I was thinking that it seemed like an odd way for a demon to smell, when I realized that Buddy, Heather's little brother with a fondness for invisibility, must be in the room.

Less than a minute after he'd jerked my earlobe, I noticed one of the manuscript pages come sliding out from under the base of one of the big candlesticks. It floated up to the flickering flame of a black candle and took fire.

"A little accident, professor," I mentioned, nodding at the burning parchment.

"Good gravy," he exclaimed, turning and seeing the burning page drifting toward the floor. He snatched off his three-horned headgear and swatted at it. But it was completely black ashes when it hit the stones.

Muttering, glowering, he thumped his hat back atop his bald head.

Behind him a candle holder toppled over, falling across the pentagram.

"Who's doing this? Cease at once or the demons will be angered."

"That'll distract him for a few seconds." Heather was standing beside me.

"How'd — "

"A simple materialization." She touched the heavy ropes that were wound around me and they fell away, no longer knotted. "Now get back against the wall. I'm going to have to face him."

"Can't we just materialize out of here?"

"I can — you can't."

"Ah, the amateur conjuror." Krouch had righted the candlestick and was standing glaring over at Heather. "Come to mystify us with a few simple card tricks, have you, my dear?"

"Actually, prof, I'm here to get Will and this girl out of your clutches."

He laughed, rolling up his right sleeve another notch. "You alone? What's wrong with your dear old dad and the rest of those inbred yahoos you reside with?"

"You're not that important or powerful," she informed him. "I can handle you on my own."

"Oh, really now?"

Sue leaned closer to me to ask, "Can she actually do this? I know she's an oddball, but — "

"Quiet, if you can," Heather said.

The professor raised his right hand to chest level, pointing a stubby forefinger at her. He began an incantation in what I imagined must be a dead, a long dead, language.

Heather unfolded a sheet of yellowed parchment she'd been holding in her hand. "This one was once used to deflect Count Monstrodamus himself," she told the babbling professor.

Pausing to chuckle, he then went on with his spellcasting.

Heather started reading her counterspell, which sounded to be in Latin. In her left hand, I noticed, she was clutching an amulet. The size of a silver dollar, it was made of a greenish coppery metal and had a glowing red stone at its center.

All at once Krouch made a whooping sound and fell over backward. His backside smacked the stone floor inside the pentagram and his horned hat popped clean off his head.



"Your magic's working," I said encouragingly.

"Nope, that was just Buddy tripping him." She returned to reading the spell aloud.

Krouch was shivering as he rose up from the floor. His face had turned a bright pink and tiny plumes of white smoke were spilling out of the sleeves of his robe.

An enormous roaring started up, soon filling the room. The flames of the black candles were all snuffed out at once and then a cloud of sooty black engulfed the swaying professor.

"Get clear, Buddy," warned Heather.

"Aw, I'm already parked on the trunk, Sis. Relax."

The cloud of blackness swirled, thinned, and was gone. So was Professor Krouch. His hat and the robe remained, sprawled on the stone floor. There was, however, no trace of Krouch himself.

I asked, "Where is he?"

"Elsewhere," answered Heather.

"Permanently?"

"For all time."

"How do we explain that to people?"

"He'll send in his resignation from Buenos Aires."

"But if —"

"Honestly, Will, if we can do what you just saw us do — we can sure as heck fake a few simple letters, huh?"

The stone door came rattling open and Heather's father stepped into the chamber. "You did a great job, hon," he told his daughter.

"I did, yeah," she agreed.

Mr. Moon bowed in Sue's direction. "Miss Smith, I can drive you home to your sorority house," he offered. "I imagine Heather and Will will want to —"

"I don't know." She was looking perplexed and fragile. She reached out to touch my hand.

"I'll see her home," I volunteered.

Sue sighed and smiled. "Thanks. I'd really appreciate that, Will, darling."

Heather eyed me. "That's what you really want to do?"

"She's been through a terrific ordeal, Heather," I explained. "And,

you know, Sue's not used to this sort of supernatural stuff the way you and — "


"Right. I understand." She snapped her fingers once and then she simply wasn't there.

The way it worked out after that, I ended up going steady with Sue Smith. She was, as I may've mentioned, very attractive. On top of which, she was a great deal more conventional than Heather and when I took her to dances and parties, she fit in just fine.

For the remainder of my senior year I didn't see much of Heather, and nothing at all of her family. Nat and I didn't get together much anymore either. The last time I ran into him he told me I was a first class putz. That was the same week I gave Sue my fraternity pin. Nat added that I'd made a huge mistake and was linking up with the wrong woman.

Exactly a year and a half after we graduated, Sue and I were married.

It took me quite a while to realize that there are worse things in the world than eccentricity or even black magic and sorcery.

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# COMING ATTRACTIONS

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**C**ALL IT SERENDIPITY. On my way out to dinner tonight, mulling over this column, I found a box of discarded digests on 18th Street off Broadway. The issues of *F&SF* were delights, with stories by Kate Wilhelm, Thomas M. Disch, Albert Cowdrey under his pseudonym of Chet Arthur, and Dean R. Koontz, trenchant reviews by Judith Merrill, and covers by Ron Walotsky and Hannes Bok.

This glimpse of where we've been makes it nice to report where we're going, because we've got terrific things in store for you, from some of these same luminaries and from a host of bright new talents.

Next month our cover story is a knockout novella by **Adam-Troy Castro**. "The Funeral March of the Marionettes" shows us an alien rite that makes those old week-long dance marathons seem sensible (and comprehensible) by comparison. Except there's one human woman who understands the ritual...understands it so well, in fact, that she's willing to die for it.

**Nancy Etchemendy** brings us a moving tale of cats and spouses, of fine meals and difficult decisions, of "Saints and Martyrs."

New writer **Tom Cool** makes his *F&SF* debut with a crafty tale of how far some people will go to make a living, in "Universal Emulators." And in the months to come, we'll have stories by **Albert Cowdrey**, **Dale Bailey**, and **Linda Nagata**, among the many. You won't want to miss a bit of it. Since the U.S. Postal Service is far more reliable than serendipity when it comes to bringing you the magazine, you'll want to master your own fate and make sure your subscription is current.

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